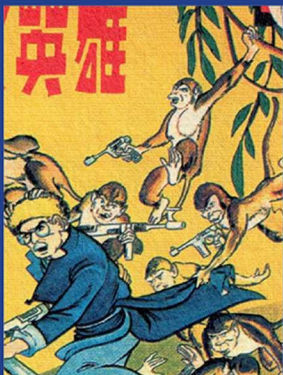
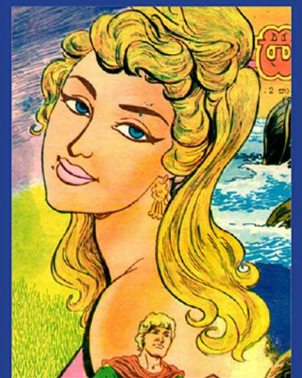
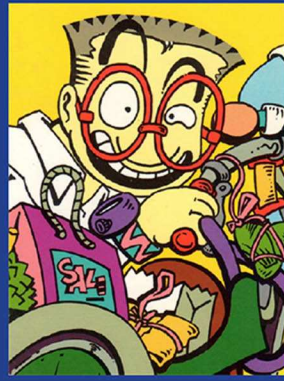


# Asian Comics

John A. Lent



Asian  
Comics



University Press of Mississippi / Jackson

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Summary: "Grand in its scope, *Asian Comics* dispels the myth that, outside of Japan, the continent is nearly devoid of comic strips and comic books. Relying on his fifty years of Asian mass communication and comic art research, during which he traveled to Asia at least seventy-eight times and visited many studios and workplaces, John A. Lent shows that nearly every country had a golden age of cartooning and has experienced a recent rejuvenation of the art form. As only Japanese comics output has received close and by now voluminous scrutiny, *Asian Comics* tells the story of the major comics creators outside of Japan. Lent covers the nations and regions of Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. Organized by regions of East, Southeast, and South Asia, *Asian Comics* provides 178 black & white illustrations and detailed information on comics of sixteen countries and regions—their histories, key creators, characters, contemporary status, problems, trends, and issues. One chapter harkens back to predecessors of comics in Asia, describing scrolls, paintings, books, and puppetry with humorous tinges, primarily in China, India, Indonesia, and Japan. The first overview of Asian comic books and magazines (both mainstream and alternative), graphic novels, newspaper comic strips and gag panels, plus cartoon/humor magazines, *Asian Comics* brims with facts, fascinating anecdotes, and interview quotes from many pioneering masters, as well as younger artists"— Provided by publisher.

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To my many cartoonist friends worldwide and  
the research community that studies them:  
you have made it a magnificent adventure



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Asian  
Comics

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If I were to choose a few words to describe my writing and professional careers, I would say that I strove to be a gap plugger. When I started out professionally in 1960, the number of voids I found in mass communication research was inestimable; the severity of the barrenness in popular culture studies was even more pronounced, as was, of course, comic art scholarship. What an open field we aspiring researchers had during those times.

This book grew out of such a hole in comics scholarship—the absence of study of Asian comic art. Actually, when this book was conceived more than twenty-two years ago (yes, that long; as I have joked with friends, only the building of the Pyramids took longer!), there was a dearth of scholarly writing on any aspect of cartoons and comics. Particularly, the parochialism of the field did not sanction much in the way of studying other countries' comics. The thinking in many quarters was that comics are an American idiom, and that's that.

Of course, comics and cartoon scholarship has been magnified manyfold during the intervening years, but, until now, there has not been a book-length treatment of Asian comics in any language. Sure, there has been a forest full of writings on Japanese manga, but not much on other Asian countries with relatively long and vibrant comics histories. Here, I am thinking of Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam.

To not be aware of comics in these and other Asian countries is to miss out on stories of fascinating and inspirational figures and unusual and sometimes significant phenomena. Extraordinary individuals include Mohammad Harun-Or-Rashid, who borrowed money, purchased pearls in his native Bangladesh, then sold them at a huge profit in Bangkok so that he could start his *Cartoon Magazine*; Johnny Hidajat of Indonesia, who altered the personality, theme, and name of his main character, Djon Domino, to suit a slew of periodicals, and then for years drew an unimaginable sixty to seventy-five strips of three to four frames every day; Liu Hsing-chin of Taiwan, a teacher who, in the 1950s, joining the anticomics bandwagon, drew a serial strip imploring students not to read it, only to watch his strip

# Introduction



itself become a smash hit; Tony Wong, who, after almost single-handedly developing Hong Kong's comics industry, was convicted and served prison time for financial crimes, and upon his release became the kingpin of comics once again with his new company, Jade Dynasty; and Anant Pai, who, noticing that Indian children did not know much about their own culture, launched Amar Chitra Katha, a series of hundreds of comic book titles on Indian history, mythology, and religion.

Then there are Dr. Dwinita Larasati of Indonesia, who, while studying abroad, sent diaries of comics that she drew as letters home to her mother, which she later assembled into popular comic books published by a company she set up herself; Rukmini Sekhar, who took a different slant on India's vast store of mythological tales by gathering villagers' out-of-the-norm renditions of those tales and publishing them under her Vivalok Comics imprint; and Chu Teh-yung, one of Asia's most prominent cartoonists, who created his very popular strip, *The Couple*, while in the Taiwanese army, drawing under a blanket at night using a flashlight and then splitting the panels and sending them individually in separate envelopes to his father to avoid military censors.

The types of comic books found in Asia and the conditions under which they have been published and distributed are equally eye opening. To stereotype or categorize Asian comics is a futile exercise, because they come in various sizes, formats, and genres. In Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, a comic book is made up of hundreds of pages with little text and considerable cinematic formatting; a Sri Lankan comic "paper" traditionally has consisted of sixteen pages featuring fourteen stories in color, each serialized story given only a single page and drawn by a different artist; Myanmar comics usually are printed in volumes of sixty to eighty pages and come in various sizes; and in Thailand, comics for years have been distinguished by variations in size and production quality, the pocket-size ones convenient for reading when stuck in traffic jams. Thai comic books include poorly printed, inexpensive publications containing adult-oriented, serialized stories, as well as humor comics weeklies of a hundred or more pages of

single-frame cartoons with stock characters. A Bangladeshi comic book can be expected to come in two versions of different paper stock and printing quality, to appeal to both poor and more affluent readers.

What else can one expect to find in the histories of Asian comics? One of the world's first graphic novels in Taguan Hardjo's so-labeled *Morina*, which appeared in Indonesia in 1962; lyrics-laced comics in Cambodia; annual sexual and scatological cartoon magazines designed for Nepal's convivial Cow Festival; and books by the king of Thailand illustrated comic book style by a famous Thai cartoonist. Also out of the ordinary is that a member of the royalty, a national leader, and the founding heads of state of Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam, respectively, supposedly drew those nations' first cartoons.

When work on this book began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Asian comics were on a precipice, their golden years behind them and their future looking bleak. Comic artists were struggling for stability in the face of diminished readership, inroads made by television, the impact of manga in East and Southeast Asia, the lack of copyright protection, and the existence of rampant piracy. But Asian comics did not topple over the edge, experiencing a significant rebirth as an art form and an industry beginning in the latter part of the 1990s. At that time, the medium was structured differently with new companies and ways of production and distribution; reinvented with new genres and varied formats, venues, and adaptations; accorded more recognition and respect by governments and society; opened up to more participation by women as creators and readers; and enhanced by a sense of professionalism.

It may seem contradictory that comic book sales are down in most of Asia, yet new companies appear. Plausible explanations are: some new companies have other survival strategies in mind, such as embracing the entertainment industry more broadly; comics companies expect to make profits from merchandise spun off from characters; a number of new (and old) companies earn profits by reprinting Japanese comics; and some comics companies hope to sell subsidiary rights to their

characters for television shows, feature movies, and animation.

Sales and distribution of comics have changed significantly since the early 1990s. Previously, fans rented comic books at shops or roadside stalls that catered primarily to male customers. Rentals still exist, but now they are found more often in Internet cafés. Also, with the accelerated growth of the middle class in a number of Asian countries and a corresponding increase in the spending power of young people, comic books are increasingly sold in comics specialty shops and retail bookstores. Most significantly, comics are increasingly distributed online, and distributors are making more attempts to market comic books outside their country of origin.

Following the current trends of digitalization, commercialization, and globalization, Asian comic artists and publishers have reinvented themselves, creating new genres such as *yaoi* (boy's love) and *haksup* (study); using conduits such as the Internet and mobile phones; repackaging their products into graphic novels and other high-quality, literary forms; developing alternative and underground formats; and recognizing and nurturing adult audiences.

Also visible in recent years has been the elevation of the Asian comic book from just a schoolchild's diversion to an art form, educational tool, and profitable consumer item worthy of recognition and respect in government and cultural circles. It is not unusual to see, in some parts of Asia, university programs studying comics; museums, research institutes, and libraries devoted to comics; and comics conventions and festivals. Sometimes, governments will provide funding to and confer national honors on particularly successful comic artists.

The situation of women in this field is not ideal, but their role has been expanded, with more women finding fame as artists and writers, particularly in East Asia and parts of Southeast Asia; a few have succeeded as publishers of their own and others' books. Additionally, Asian women now make up a larger percentage of the total comics audience than ever before, probably

because sales outlets are becoming more accommodating to women, more women are creating comics, there are subsequently more genres and titles that appeal to women and girls, and gender portrayals are often refined or softened.

This all seems to bode well for Asian comics, but these trends must be considered with caution, because, as is abundantly made clear in the chapters that follow, it would be foolhardy to predict the future of comics in Asia (or any region, for that matter), what with economic and market fluctuations and the many contenders for the attention of potential readers. Even making the generalizations that I have already ventured may be foolhardy, for there is no one Asia but a number of countries and territories that are very disparate in language, culture, and religion, as well as in political and economic systems, all factors that affect how stories are created and told and how comic books are produced and distributed.

Having said that, *Asian Comics* sets out to provide as comprehensive an account as possible of the region's comic art, defined here as comic books and magazines, graphic novels, newspaper comic strips and gag panels, and cartoon and humor magazines. Both mainstream and alternative (independent) comic books are included. The extent to which a comics form is covered depends on its standing relative to other comic art in a particular country. For example, cartoon and humor magazines are discussed more fully in the Bangladesh and Malaysia chapters because these have been instrumental in advancing comics and cartoons in those two countries. The chapter sizes also vary depending on the importance of comics in a given country and, to be honest, on the availability of research materials. Although political and editorial cartoons are not a major focus, a discussion of them must be included, because such cartoons are almost always the first stage in the evolutionary process of comic art.

In this book, comics are viewed from the perspectives of history, industry, and art. A knowledge of history can help one understand the present, uncover the development of interrelationships between different forms and

genres, and learn about the previously untold and fascinating stories of pioneer cartoonists. Industry refers to comics as corporate entities engaging in production, distribution, and sales. Art or aesthetics subsumes aspects such as layout and format, storytelling and drawing styles, and, in some cases, abbreviated story plots.

The contours of Asia for the purposes of this book are those outlined decades ago by the Association for Asian Studies, namely East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Inner or Central Asia. I have included here only countries and territories in which I conducted original research: China, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Taiwan in East Asia; Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam in Southeast Asia; and Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka in South Asia. There is also a chapter on Nepal, which is partly based on extensive notes compiled by a Nepalese graduate student, Fungma Fudong, who conducted interviews in Kathmandu on my behalf; and on interviews I conducted with two Nepalese cartoonists while they were abroad. Japan is omitted because of the abundance of research already available on manga; the publisher and I felt that a chapter on Japan would detract from the attention that should be given to lesser-known comics traditions elsewhere in Asia. I favor the country approach for two reasons: (1) each country is distinct culturally, linguistically, and politically; and (2) to lump countries together thematically would integrate them in ways that are neither realistic nor appropriate.

The overarching principle of almost all my research on any topic for more than a half century has been that it is essential to discover directly from those who lived through events what they know, believe, and experienced. The research for this book is supported by interviews I conducted beginning in the 1980s with about four hundred Asian comics editors, artists, and writers, as well as comics publishers, festival directors, Internet café and comics rental store owners, critics, comics academicians, government regulatory agency officials, comics pirates, and animators. Some comics pioneers I interviewed began their careers in the 1920s and 1930s (e.g., Tony Velasquez of the Philippines; Hua

Junwu, Zhang Ding, Liao Bingxiong, Te Wei, Ding Cong, and Mai Fei of China; and Kazi Abul Kazem of Bangladesh). Other interviewees singled out for playing pivotal roles in comics development from the 1940s through the 1960s, the heyday of comic books in a number of Asian countries, include Abu Abraham, R. K. Laxman, Anant Pai, Abid Surti, and Pran Kumar of India; Larry Alcala, Pablo Gomez, and Nonoy Marcelo of the Philippines; Kim Song-Hwan and Chung Woon Kyung of Korea; Camillus Perera, Jiffry Yoonoos, and W. R. Wijesoma of Sri Lanka; Jiang Yousheng, Hong Huang, Fang Cheng, Han Shang Yi, He Wei, and Wang Fuyang of China; Ranabi (Rafiqun Nabi) and Nazrul Islam of Bangladesh; Johnny Hidajat, Pramono, Dwi Koendoro, and Gerardus M. Sudarta of Indonesia; Rejabhad and Lat of Malaysia; Uth Roeun of Cambodia; Aung Shein, U Ngwe Kyi, Maung Maung, Thu Ta, Thaw Ka, and Chit Shwe of Myanmar; and Tony Wong and Lee Wai-chun of Hong Kong.

The occasions for these interviews were about sixty trips to Asia that I made from 1986 to 2012, the purposes of which were to participate in conferences and to interview cartoonists. Prior to 1986, and beginning in 1964, I had traveled to various parts of the continent eighteen other times, conducting research on topics besides comic art. During research and teaching stints in the Philippines in 1964 and 1965 and in Malaysia from 1972 to 1974, I had chances to observe comics in important stages of their development. In the summers of 1992 and 1993, I made two major research trips to Asia specifically to interview cartoon/comics and animation personnel—in South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Singapore in 1992; and in India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, and China in 1993.

Before the Internet age, tracking down the elusive cartoonists was a difficult task, as networks, cartoonists' associations, and directories were rare. Often, identifying interviewees was by the snowball approach—one cartoonist would lead me to others. In almost all cases, people involved in comic arts were very cooperative and gracious, pleased that someone from academia

was interested in their work. They were often generous, offering me specimens of original comics and cartoons. One must remember that before contemporary times, the public and cartoonists themselves did not allot any value to their original artwork after it had been published; thus, in the Philippines, for example, originals often ended up as scrap paper. In Gujarat, India, a cartoonist I interviewed on the day he retired from a newspaper offered me hundreds and hundreds of his original drawings, because, he said, the next day they would be tossed out.

Interviews were recorded manually with pen and legal pad, without audio or video instruments, to provide a more natural environment and ensure candidness on the part of interviewees. I depended on my ability to write notes nearly verbatim, learned from my journalism training. Immediately after each interview, I rewrote and edited the notes, sometimes with the help of an interpreter if I had used one. Many interviewees spoke English, so that interpreters were unnecessary.

In dozens of instances, I supplemented interviews with visits to publishing houses, studios and other workplaces, exhibitions, distribution outlets, comics libraries, and museums. Whenever available, I scrutinized primary documents such as clippings, artists' and others' personal collections, sketchbooks, scrapbooks, and archival materials. I conducted on-the-spot research, to varying degrees, in more than fifty U.S. libraries as well as others in Canada, Asia, and Europe, and regularly referred to hundreds of books, journals, and popular and trade periodicals. I made useful contacts and gathered substantial information by founding and chairing the Asian Research Center of Animation and Comic Art (ARCACA) at the Communication University of China, Beijing, in 2006 and the Asia-Pacific Animation and Comics Association in 2008; by cofounding and cochairing the annual Asian Youth Animation and Comics Contest (AYACC) in Guiyang, China, starting in 2007; and by founding and publishing the *International Journal of Comic Art*, twice yearly since 1999. I seldom used the Internet, although I gathered some (actually very little) information from online sources to update the situation

in countries I have not been to for quite some time, such as Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka.

Some parts of *Asian Comics* were built on the skeletons of chapters and articles I have written during the past twenty-five years. However, such already published works were heavily modified through organizational tweaking, adding information, updating existing information, and much editing, essentially fashioning new chapters.





## Artists with a Keen Sense of Humor

It is not too difficult to find almost anywhere paintings and prints that, through the benefit of history, have become identified as fine or folk art and that include elements common to comics and cartoons, among them caricature, satire, parody, humor, wit, playfulness, narrative, and sequence.

It is also rather easy, worldwide, to find examples of artists who were just as comfortable drawing a cartoon as they were composing a painting; many even made their living as cartoonists. In the West, there have been many prominent artists who worked as or aspired to be cartoonists (Charles Dana Gibson, Marcel Duchamp,<sup>1</sup> George Luks, John Sloan); who especially appreciated the funnies (Pablo Picasso, for example); or who knew and used satire and caricature extremely well (Leonardo da Vinci [see Fisher 1995], George Cruikshank, James Gillray, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec). Paul Barolsky (1978, 1) added others: “In the parodies of Greek pottery, the ingenious drolleries of medieval manuscript illuminations, the playful wit of Renaissance grotesques, the delightfully humorous sculpture of the baroque, the satirical paintings of Bruegel [the Elder], Steen, and Hogarth, the mocking drawings of Thomas Rowlandson, the bizarre prints of Goya, the caricatures of Daumier, and the playful parodies of Picasso, we encounter a wide range of humorous or satirical commentaries on the human condition.” Numerous other European painters used wit, playfulness, parody, and humor in their work.<sup>2</sup>

Not only in Europe but on nearly every surface of the globe, humans have felt a need to draw, sometimes using elements of humor. On the walls of Egyptian pharaoh Hatshepsut’s mortuary temple, constructed thirty-five hundred years ago, the queen is depicted humorously, with huge, drooping breasts and rings of fat circling her body as she sits atop a mule suffering from her immense weight (Platt 1994, 26). Egyptian erotic art, although mostly created for religious purposes, had comic book characteristics. For example, the Turin papyrus has been described as consisting of a dozen pictures, each depicting a “different sexual activity, and a little text

## Chapter 1

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# A Lead-Up to Asian Comics

Early Asian Visual Humor and Narrative



accompanies the pictures—just like an erotic comic book” (El-Qhamid and Toledano 2004, 19). In fact, Egypt, more than five thousand years ago, may have been the birthplace of comics, with its “satirical deformation and comic apologies in sculpture, dance and paintings” (El-Tarabichi 1975, 25).<sup>3</sup> Even further back, twenty-five thousand years ago, rock art thought to be tinged with humor was created in Namibia (Levinson 1992, 335–41). In Latin America, Mexican comics editor Rémy Bastien (in Couch 1983, 20) credited pre-Columbian codices (screen-folded books) drawn by *tlacuilo*s (Indian artists) as the first comics (see also Brotherston 1995). Only four of the thousands of bark-paper books survive, the rest destroyed by conquering Spanish friars. The highly literate Mayans used about eight hundred ideograms to record their language aesthetically and to tell fascinating stories of outward conflicts and internal self-sacrifice (Coe 2012). Two Danish scholars, after methodically examining the techniques, contents, and functions of sequential text-image pairing of Mayan polychrome vessels and plates, conjectured that late classic Mayan culture (AD 600–900) was the birthplace of America’s comics. They showed that the Mayans were capable of depicting direction, perspective, gestures, frames, motion, sound, and smell in their pictures (Nielsen and Wichmann 2000).

A couple of problems arise when attempting to trace comic elements in ancient art: the lack of a “precise, universally accepted” definition of humor and wit (Barolsky 1978, 4) and the difficulty of discerning whether artists of old intended to be funny, satirical, or witty. Concerning the second dilemma, Barolsky suggested that:

We must be guided by our intuition and general knowledge of the period in our attempt to gain a sense of humor in Renaissance art. There are clues to determining the intention of the artist who created this humor. Playfulness and caricature are usually recognizable because they often employ overt devices such as gestures and facial expression. Parodies of style may be identified, at least tentatively, if we can determine the predominant stylistic conventions of

the period. Similarly, satire can be discerned by referring to satirical traditions in literature. Analogies of attitude, tone, or subject seem to exist between art and literature, and the study of humorous or witty tendencies in literature sometimes helps to shed light on humorous aspects of art. (1978, 8)

## The Asian Experience

Similarly, in Asia, elements of comic art can be traced back centuries; in a loose sense, the artists of such work might be considered among the first cartoonists. One must hesitate in drawing too many conclusions about the presence of deliberate humor in early Asian art, because much of it was religious and serious. But, as Shigeru Oikawa (1996, 25) wrote of Japan, “[o]f course, these works [Kamakura period scrolls] were not drawn as humorous pictures, and while this is apparent in their means of expression, it does not mean the painters were loath to invest the works with humorous scenes.” Aruna Rao (1995, 161), talking about India, said that “the religious cannot be separated from secular art, but this does not mean that the sacred does not include the profane or that religion in Indian art does not incorporate the humorous, the erotic, the playful, and the fantastic.” In some instances, clues exist as to whether a work of art was meant to be humorous. For example, in ancient Indian aesthetics, the purpose of art was to evoke an aesthetic experience, which resulted from finding a permanent *rasa* or flavor. Among the nine *rasa* listed was the comic (*hāsya rasa*) (Siegel 1989, 7). Similarly, *ukiyo-e* (woodblock print) artists of Japan let their readers know if they intended to be funny by signing with a suffix of either *giga* (comic picture) or *kyōga* (crazy, foolish picture).

As verified by many scholars, ancient murals, sculptures, painted scrolls, woodcuts and other drawings, and picture books did indeed contain one or more of the elements of cartooning, such as caricature, satire/parody, humor/playfulness, and narrative/sequence.

## Caricature

Caricature (exaggeration of facial and other bodily characteristics) permeated the early art of Asia, and, as elsewhere, grotesqueness figured strongly in the tradition of caricature. In China, grotesque figures similar to some contemporary caricature adorned burial paraphernalia as early as the Yangshao Dynasty (5000–3000 BC). One burial jar found in Shaanxi Province dating to that period features a cartoonlike image of a human face (Li 1985, 20; quoted in Liu-Lengyel 1993), and many stone statues and reliefs from about 1100 BC represented humans in humorous or satirical ways (Lent 1999, 6, 8; see also Lent 1994).

A few writers, A. L. Bader chief among them, contested whether a tradition of caricature existed in China before the twentieth century. Bader (1941, 229) wrote: “The Chinese racial genius has always been for the indirect, for suggestion, for compromising rather than for outspoken from which caricature stems. Second, caricature demands freedom of expression. . . . Finally, caricature presupposes social and political consciousness in its audience.” Fang Cheng (quoted in Hua 1989, 9) said more generally that cartoonists were virtually nonexistent in traditional China because “if the emperor was not in the mood to laugh, the slaves were forbidden to laugh.” However, other evidence reveals that Bader was off the mark. Writing in 1877, James Parton told of a printer attached to an American mission in China who brought back a “caricature” dating to the 1840s that showed an English foraging party. Parton’s belief was that the Chinese had been caricaturing for decades. He said: “Caricature, as we might suppose, is a universal practice among them; but, owing to their crude and primitive taste in such things, their efforts are seldom interesting to any but themselves. In Chinese collections, we see numberless grotesque exaggerations of the human form and face, some of which are not devoid of humor and artistic merit” (Parton 1877, 196).

Caricature seemingly was present in Indian temple sculpture, some examples dating as early as AD 200.

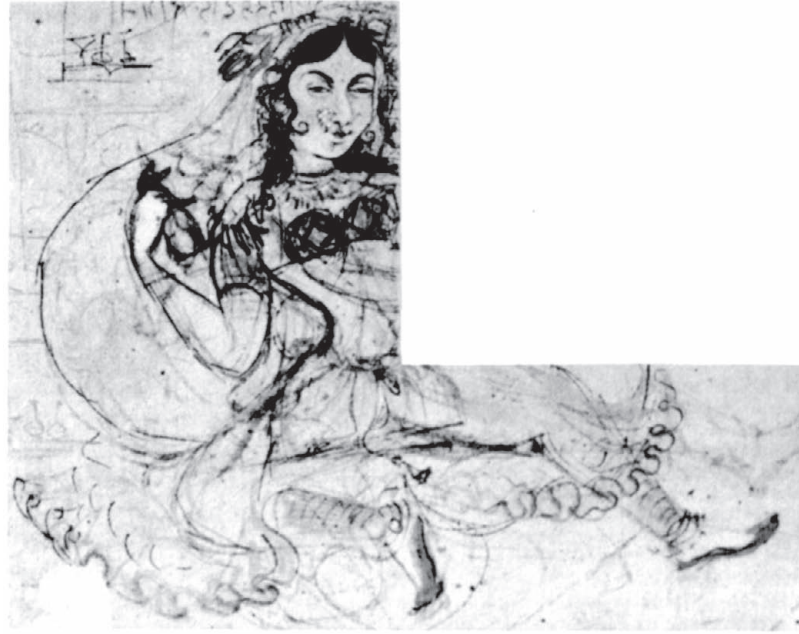


FIG. 1.1. *A Floozy*. Kotah, Rajasthan, mid-nineteenth century. From Stuart Cary Welch, *Indian Drawings and Painted Sketches* (New York: Asia Society).

However, one must be careful not to follow the thinking of early Western travelers and missionaries that Indian art was full of monstrosities, mistaking sacred images for caricature (Mitter 1977). Indian sculptures of *rakshasas* (demons) with sketches of grimacing faces drawn on their stomachs as well as sketches of very explicit sexual activity are clear examples of caricature in Indian art of the medieval period; it was seldom vicious, instead aiming to be psychologically revealing and funny (Welch 1976). Akbar (1542–1605), the third Mughal emperor, thought painting to be important and retained a stable of one hundred court artists, who, until 1590, worked in assembly-line-production fashion, drawing much psychological portraiture. Akbar’s son, Emperor Jahangir, continued his father’s fondness for and patronage of portraiture, some of which was caricature. In fact, he used caricatures drawn by court painters to determine whether the courtiers portrayed could be trusted (Seghal 1990). Soon after Jahangir’s reign, caricature came to be identified with other parts of India. The Kotah School of Rajasthan, which followed on the heels of Mughal painting, turned out a number of caricatures, including of a dancing girl in a European hat; inebriated Rajput soldiers drinking, vomiting, and passing out; and a slightly drunk woman clasping a bottle of liquor.

Part of the latter picture has been cut out, perhaps by the woman's companion, whose hand can be seen on her shoulder but who otherwise may have wanted anonymity (Welch 1976). Many other examples abound, such as *A Fat Begum* (1625), depicting an obese noblewoman of the Deccan (Welch 1993, 296), and *Drunken Musicians* (Punjab Hills, Chamba, ca. 1730), an "outrageous" painting in which the artist "twisted and pulled the human body like taffy" (Welch 1976, 129) and identified the revelers by name.

Japan has a long history of caricature, especially prevalent in the ukiyo-e of the Edo period (1600–1867); these prints usually featured Kabuki characters and courtesans of what was called the Floating World. But caricature predated ukiyo-e, the earliest found on the backs of wooden planks at Horyuji Temple, built in Nara during the seventh century. About one hundred sketches, some erotic, had been drawn by anonymous carpenter-artists. Other early caricature has been found, among other places, along the edge of an eighth-century scroll, on netsuke and other everyday objects, and in the *Chōjūgiga* (animal) scroll (humorous pictures of animals and birds) credited to Late Heian era (894–1185) priest and painter Bishop Toba Sōjō (1053–1140).

The netsuke, a small toggle used to attach pouches and other personal articles to the sash of a kimono, incorporated lively caricature for the amusement of peasants. Carvers of netsuke, beginning in the seventeenth century, depicted lighthearted good humor, "no subject, except of course the Imperial Family, [being] immune from the good-natured irreverence with which netsuke carvers approached their craft" (Rogers 1984, 18). Nathan Rogers quoted one authority as describing the netsuke as "fore-runners of contemporary cartoons or caricature."

In the *Chōjūgiga*, Toba caricatured the folly and corruption of his era, satirizing the religious hierarchy of the time through the humorous actions of monkeys, rabbits, foxes, and frogs. Two other twelfth-century scrolls, declared national treasures along with the *Chōjūgiga* and all exhibiting caricature as well as satire, humor, and narrative, are the *Shigisan engi emaki* (Legend of Mount Shigi) and *Ban Dainagon ekotoba* (Scroll of

the illustrated narrative of the Grand Counselor Ban Dainagon) (see descriptions of these and other *emaki* in Koyama-Richard 2007, 14–36; also, Takahata 1999). During the Kamakura era (1192–1333), the picture scroll in cartoon format gained more popularity, notable examples being *Jigoku Zōshi* (Hell scrolls), *Gaki Zōshi* (Hungry ghosts), *Tengu Zōshi*, and *Yamai Zōshi* (Disease scrolls). Frederik Schodt wrote of these: "Suffering is depicted with sledgehammer realism: grossly deformed demons mock cowering humans; famished grotesqueries devour corpses and human excrement with gusto; the frailty of mortals is pounded home with a parade of maladies and aberrations—a man with hemorrhoids, a hermaphrodite, an albino. But no matter how grim the world described, the artists employ a light and mocking cartoon style" (1983, 29). R. H. Blyth, in *Japanese Humour* (1963), said that the *Yamai Zōshi*, a single scroll of fifteen pictures of sick people, was meant as a reference work for physicians. He said that one of the illustrations, titled *A Dwarf*, showed a man and a priest pointing at a dwarf and two boys dancing with joy over his deformity. Others showed a man without an anus who defecates through his mouth, a woman with a mole on her face, and a man with many anuses. All were done in a mocking caricature style.

The Tokugawa era (1603–1868) was important in the development of caricature. Blyth (1959, 29) said that the period was "one of caricature, military and political resistance to it, and popular resistance to that resistance through caricature." In the seventeenth century, caricature was evident in *Otsu-e* (Otsu pictures) and *haiga* (haiku painting)\* (see Addiss 1995). *Otsu-e*, so-named because they were sold near the town of Otsu in Gifu Prefecture, were intended for the common folk who had few pleasures in their lives. Shigeru Oikawa (1996, 25) wrote that *Otsu-e* "fulfilled the role of today's comic magazines, and they were prized, enjoyed." *Otsu-e* began as Buddhist amulets for travelers but, according to Schodt (1983, 32), became "uninhibited, secular cartoons with stock themes: beautiful women, demons in priests' garb, and warriors." Begun in the Kanei era (1624–1643), *Otsu-e* were done quickly and cheaply by uneducated artists.

The haiga of that time were more difficult to decipher. For example, in Fujimori Sōbaku's (1758–1821) haiga, *Dawn of the Thirteenth Night*, the artist uses the haiku,

Once you know  
that darkness is also bright—  
the thirteenth moon

within a painting of an old couple at their brazier. Because the thirteenth night of the ninth month supposedly had the brightest moon of the year, the couple was willing to go out because they knew that the moon would provide much light. Stephen Addiss (1995, 104–5) wrote of this work: “The caricature of the faces adds a touch of humor, one of the characteristics that often appears in both haiku and haiga, helping to keep them from becoming banal or pretentious.”

The ukiyo-e, however, exemplified a much higher level of caricature that later left an indelible impact upon a number of European masters (e.g., Monet, Manet, Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec, Dante Gabriel Rossetti). Apparently, ukiyo-e ended up in Europe as a packing material in tea boxes sent from Japan (Schodt 1983, 28). Ukiyo-e caricature was wildly exaggerated (especially in *shunga* [see Fagioli 1997], which greatly enlarged the size of penises and showed nearly every conceivable way of lovemaking). Ukiyo-e were vividly colored and often relevant to the foibles of the times. Richard Lane (1982, 42, 146, 152) said that ukiyo-e's caricature “can distort reality and depart so much from it and yet still express a sensitive human beauty.” The ukiyo-e master of caricature was Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), who published, among his many works, a fifteen-volume set of caricatures of four thousand designs intended as art manuals. Calling his work *Hokusai Manga*, Hokusai coined the word for Japanese comics, combining the Chinese ideograms *man* (involuntary) and *ga* (picture).

#### Satire and Parody

Like the early European satirical artists William Hogarth and Honoré Daumier, Asian painters accurately

recorded the social and political milieu in which they worked. Under authoritarian governments, such painters of dissent resorted to hidden codes to transmit their messages. In the eleventh century, during China's Song Dynasty (960–1278), “painted allusions to poetry became a vehicle for lodging silent complaint”<sup>5</sup> (Murck 2000, 2). The scrolls that these painters created were meant for private viewing, intended to “empathize with those who had been punished, to ridicule imperial judgments, and to satirize contemporaries for the amusement and edification of a trusted circle of friends” (Murck 2000, 3). The ways in which these poetic landscapes imparted dissent varied. Some illustrated a poem's main point, while others either lyrically summarized a “revelation central to the referenced poem” or “treated visual imagery in ways analogous to poetry”<sup>6</sup> (Murck 2000, 4). Books of paintings with verse also carried a number of political allusions, some satirical in intent. *Mei hua xi shen pu* (Register of plum blossom portraits) by Song Boren in the mid-thirteenth century, the earliest known printed book in China in which the illustrations do more than just support the text, has political allusions encoded in its poetry (Clunas 1997, 135–37).

Later Chinese artists such as Zhu Da (1626–1705; penname, Ba Da Shan Ren) and Luo Liangfeng (1733–1799) were known for using political satire and caricature to make their points. Zhu Da's *Peacocks*, drawn in 1690, showed local government officials as ugly peacocks standing on an unstable egg-shaped rock as they waited for the emperor to pass by. Symbolically, the officials' positions were portrayed as very shaky despite their flattery of the emperor. Luo, in his *Ghosts' Farce Pictures*, made fun of unacceptable human behavior by the population at large during the Qing Dynasty. Throughout the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) Dynasties, political satire in art was abundant, found in *nianhua*, colored woodblock prints based on historical stories, folklore, and current events (Flath 2004).

In Japan, Toba Sōjō introduced hilarious parody in his scrolls, showing priests, noblemen, and other elite-class people doing mischievous things. His *Chōjūgiga* scroll, discussed above, showed animals pretending to



be humans, and, like early art forms in all cultures, it had a religious theme. In the eighteenth century, *Toba-e*hon (Toba picture books) and *hanjimon*o (visual puzzles or rebuses) parodied politics and other dimensions of Japanese society. Both relied on amusing visual puns with secret meanings (Duus 2001, 968). *Toba-e*hon first appeared in 1702, when Shumboku Ōoka created a cartoon book, *Tobae Sankokushi*, portraying “mischievous, long-legged little men frolicking in scenes of daily life in Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo (Tokyo)” (Schodt 1983, 36–37). The book spawned others, all monochrome, some with fables in text. *Toba-e*hon, according to Peter Duus (2001, 971), often “spoofed drunken, pompous, and posturing samurai” in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Duus (2001, 968) also gave an example of an 1858 *hanjimon*o “guide to the shogunal capital at Edo [that] punned its way through the famous places (*meisho*) of the city, simultaneously playing on words and images, sounds and objects.” He said that the *hanjimon*o prints were meant to amuse, “but the concealment of political meanings in visual art had another purpose. Strategies of concealment were inevitable in a political culture that drastically restricted the dissemination of political opinion or political news.”

Ukiyo-e also employed satire; the famous American novelist and ukiyo-e connoisseur James Michener (1954; see also 1959) claimed that they grew out of a sense of social protest.<sup>7</sup> Michener (1954, 211–12) added: “It was an art of gentle ridicule and it was an art that thumbed its nose at the Tokugawa dictatorship. In none of its other manifestations did *ukiyo-e* exhibit its true character more than in its unending barrage of *shunga*. Often the duped husbands were pompous *samurai*, the men the princesses ran off with were commoners. The young blade who crept into the nobleman’s bed while he lay snoring was the gardener.” Frank Whitford (1977, 41) held that ukiyo-e artists “not only wanted to shock and scare, they also wanted to amuse, and many of their prints show people humorously deformed, or strange beasts with bizarre proportions acting like humans.” He said that embedded in many of the prints was a

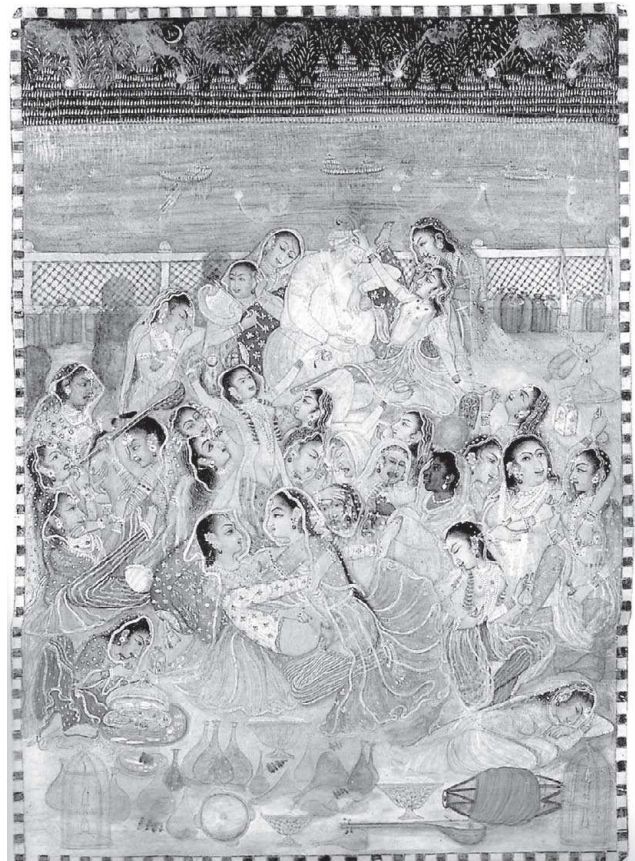


FIG. 1.2. *By the Light of the Moon, and Fireworks*. Nihal Chand. Rajasthan, ca. 1740. Full of wicked humor: women fighting, drunkenness, lovemaking, grotesquerie. From Stuart Cary Welch, *India: Art and Culture, 1300–1900* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), 373.

multiplicity of meanings, politically motivated under the repressive shogunate. Thus, some of the prints may have acted as political cartoons of the day. Japanese art became even more satirical when the Tokugawa government fell apart after the U.S. invasion in the mid-nineteenth century. Throughout eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Japan, artists also drew *mitate-e*, parody prints that good-naturedly mocked everything from the classic *The Tale of Genji* to children, the Boy’s Day holiday, and rivers (Baten 1995).

Indian artists also were social satirists, those from some parts of the country more so than others. Stuart Cary Welch (1993, 372) wrote, for example, that “[s]atire, broad humor, and sexual explicitness enliven Rajput art far more frequently than Mughal.” A Rajasthani watercolor painting of ca. 1740, entitled *By the Light of the Moon, and Fireworks* and attributed to Nihal Chand, incorporates all of these qualities, although with “masterful sleight of hand.” Welch (1993, 372) described the painting’s





**FIG. 1.3.** Kalighat painting, nineteenth century, depicting a woman leading her lover on a leash. From Jyotindra Jain, *Kalighat Painting: Images from a Changing World* (Ahmedabad: Mapin, 1999), 109.

tongue-in-cheek wickedness and follies: the fat old sot struggling to balance both cup and dancing girl—but preferring the former; a lightly attired bounding nymphet ringing her bells; perverse ladies enacting the friendly vices of the zenana; and a brazen couple of moderate ambiguity demonstrating their devotion with the devil-may-care freedom of turtledoves. . . . On the marble terrace . . . other guests add further spice to the human jungle. Three lady musicians, quibbling over a wrong note, screech, tear hair, and wallop one another in a vignette that needs only to be seen to be heard. Within the eye of the storm, huddled together for reasons left to the imagination, are a stonily profiled elderly lady (the genteel wife of the rotund host?), a black eunuch, and two disembodied faces so alarming that we avert our glance.

Some of the painters who sold their works in the market of Kalighat around the Kali Temple in Calcutta

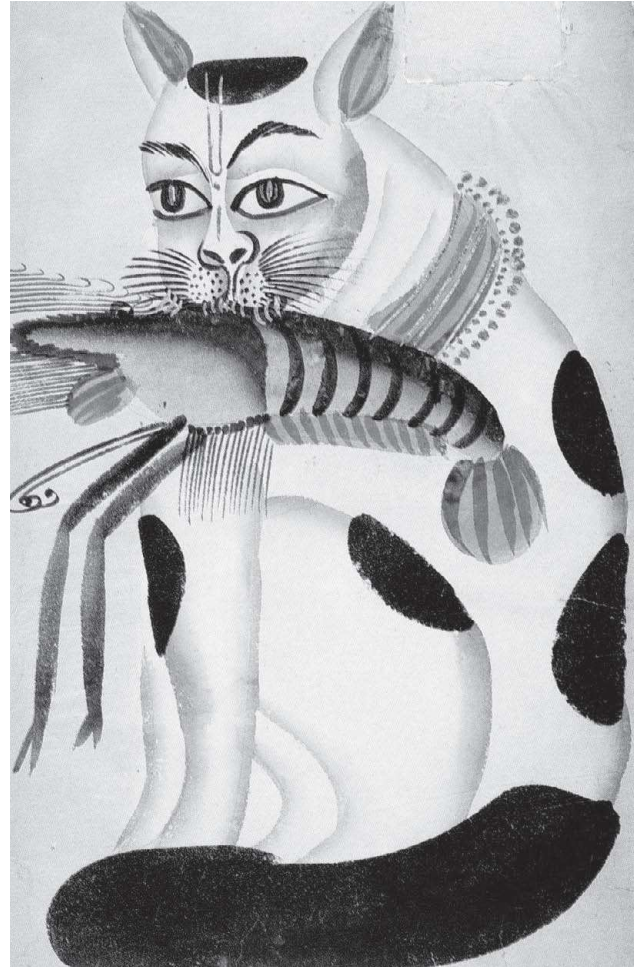


**FIG. 1.4.** Kalighat painting of cat with a prawn in its mouth, ca. 1895, spoofing hypocritical vegetarian priests. From Balraj Khanna, *Kalighat: Indian Popular Painting, 1800–1930* (Boston: Shambhala Redstone Editions, 1993), 5.

were satirists. Working from the mid-eighteenth century through the nineteenth century, these often anonymous artists provided “lively pictures reflecting the social realities and mores of the time. With their trenchant wit and humour, the Kalighat artists were the first true caricaturists and satirical artists of India” (Rao 1995, 169). The colorful prints, sold as souvenirs to pilgrims to the temple, evolved from *patas*, the scrolls taken from village to village in earlier times. These Kalighat paintings had five elements, one of which was comical (see Ghosh 1968, 21–23; also Archer 1971). Their subjects ranged from the avenging goddess Kali to whores and the latest scandal. Favored targets of artists who used cartoon-cum-caricature were Bengali dandies (Indian men who had become Westernized and courted the favors of prostitutes), the follies of youth, quarrels among cowives, husbands slaying their Westernized

wives, women trampling their idle lovers, wine and women, courtships between priests and prostitutes, and hypocritical priests. Dandies were shown as being under the sexual hold of courtesans, who lead them as sheep, step on them, hit them, or hold them as lapdogs.

Vaishnava priests were depicted as outwardly religious but not adverse to assaulting unsuspecting women; they often appeared as cats eating fish, a reference to their vegetarianism gone astray. Khanna (1993, 35) credited Kalighat prints with “wilful satire and deliberate caricature” but probably went too far when claiming that these characteristics were being used for the “first time in Indian art.”

As with most art forms described in this chapter, Javanese wayang had the primary purpose of “teaching and preserving the complex treasure of local mystical beliefs” (Peacock 1968; quoted in Berman 2001, 23). That did not prevent artists from engaging in subtle satire, as Benedict Anderson (1990, 167) has indicated: “In wayang of whatever sort, the punakawan (wayang clowns) appear both as comic characters *within the line* of the drama, embedded in its space and time, and as mouth-pieces for contemporaneous satire directed straight at the audience, so to speak *at right angles* to the drama and outside its space and time.” The wayang clowns for centuries spoke for the common people, partly through veiled messages concerning “numerous issues that grind away in silence beneath serene surfaces” (Berman 2001, 24). It also helped that the clowns could speak their minds in their masters’ presence. Laine Berman (2001, 24) said that this privilege resulted because of the “obvious difference in status, the clowns’ coarseness to their masters’ elegance, ugliness to graceful appearance, crude to exquisite speech,” allowing clowns “to laugh at their betters but never undermine them.” *Wayang kulit* clowns were often used to perform farces as interludes within epic dramas, making fun of upper-caste and upper-class dialects and improvising biting satirical commentary (Lent 1993, 21).

Wayang characters are used in contemporary Indonesian cartooning. Strip cartoonist and animator Dwi Koendoro, who has said that satire and caricature

abound in one particular part of wayang called *goro-goro*, uses the “two-dimensional aspects” of style and philosophy in his strips (Koendoro 1992), while Indonesia’s most prominent editorial cartoonist, G. M. Sudarta (1992), said that each wayang clown represents attributes that are exaggerated caricature: Semar, symbol of wisdom; Petruk, frank speech; Gareng, insulting speech; Bagong, stupidity. Giving an example of his use of these characters, Sudarta (1992) said: “When I have a character point, it is saying indirectly that it is speaking frankly.” Very prolific cartoonist Johnny Hidayat (1992) said that he developed his popular character Djon Domino because he was influenced by wayang’s Petruk.

#### Humor, Wit, Playfulness

These three characteristics were abundant in early Asian paintings, although the subtleties of the humor sometimes defied easy comprehension. Early Chinese stone carvings occasionally had characteristics of humor and sarcasm. One found in Wuliang Ci, Shandong Province, dating from the Eastern Han Dynasty (147–157), portrayed the tyrannical and licentious Jie, last king of the Xia Dynasty, holding a spear while sitting on the shoulders of two women. Hongying Liu-Lengyel (1993) claimed that the drawing demonstrates, in a humorous manner, the king’s negative attitude toward women. In at least one case, an emperor, Xianzong, made a humorous drawing for political purposes. Entitled *Keeping Good Terms with Everyone*, the brush drawing was composed when Xianzong succeeded his tyrannical father, Yingzong, in 1465; with it, he intended to lighten the people’s mood and let them know that a different style of rule was forthcoming. The print showed three men’s faces on a common body, giving the impression that they were holding one another. The three portraits were composed in such a way as to form one smiling face (Mu 1991, 36).

In Chinese art, the humor regularly revolves around puns, word play, and connotative meanings attached to verses and other text accompanying drawings, and around folktales as well as the philosophy of the artist.

As Shen C. Y. Fu (1994, 61) said, many cartoonists even into contemporary times have looked to the past for inspiration, using traditional approaches of indirection, symbolism, and inscriptions to “express satirical intent, inject humor in their art, or elicit a laugh or smile from the viewer.” One of the most comic figures found in traditional Chinese and Japanese paintings (and modern cartoons) is the folk hero Zhong Kui (Shoki in Japan), known as the “demon queller.” The character appeared in a dream Tang emperor Ming Huang had while feverish. After Zhong Kui sent the fever away, the emperor asked painter Wu Tao-tze to do a portrait of his hero (Forrer 1996, 66). Zhong Kui’s ugly face, heavy beard, and intoxicated demeanor have been the subject of many works since then.

Also exhibiting much humor and playfulness were the Chinese Spring Palace paintings from the late Ming (1560–1640) and succeeding Qing Dynasties, all erotic and irreverent. Many deal with a husband getting caught seducing or copulating with a servant girl or concubine, while others portray a jealous child trying to disrupt his parents’ lovemaking by pulling his father’s queue, a naked wife trying to entice her studious husband to bed, a bashful bride trying to escape the bridal chamber, or a fat lady bitten on her sex organ by a scorpion while she uses the chamber pot (Yimen 1997; see also De Smedt 1981). Yimen, the author of *Dreams of Spring*, pointed out that humor is an “important ingredient” of erotic art and that some popular booklets of the late Ming “even become comics, where legends are added to the scenes” (43–45).

Ancient Indian art was peppered with humor and playfulness, found in *patas* (painted scrolls; Sen Gupta 1973), *kalamkari* (pen drawings), and temple erotica, especially at Khajuraho (850–1050) and Konārak (thirteenth century), where exaggerated (and seemingly impossible) sexual positions were sculpted (e.g., see Elisofon and Watts 1971; Bhattacharyya 1975, 28–29). It was also in composites (human and animal figures made up of other figures) and in allegorical paintings, such as one Deccan work of ca. 1680 called *Princely Deer Hunter* in which “a golden sunset caresses a softly feminine



FIG. 1.5. Krishna astride an elephant of *gopis*. Kalighat painting, 1870. Jyotindra Jain, *Kalighat Painting: Images from a Changing World* (Ahmedabad: Mapin, 1999), 92.

landscape—a strip of hips, belly, and breasts, fringed by silhouetted trees” (Welch 1993, 308–9). Quite a few of the Indian composites show beautiful women fancifully twisting “their bodies in impossible positions so as to compose the forms of an elephant, a horse or a chariot to provide a mount for the joy-rides of Krishna” (Das 1982, 132). Composites were popular in other parts of the world, including Persia, from where the Mughal artists learned the practice, and, as will be seen later, Japan.

Art historian Nobuo Tsuji’s observation that “[b]ehind the façade of Japanese seriousness, a playful heart is hidden” (1986, 13–14) relates to a philosophy of art and aesthetics that reaches back as far as the Fujiwara period (Late Heian, 894–1185). Tsuji explained: “The Fujiwara nobility also sought things lighthearted



and gay that would enliven and unbind their hearts. This is not unrelated to their bountiful curiosity in regards to the reality of life. When coming across something that was unusual, they would utter the word *okashi* (funny or amusing). This feeling of *okashi* was also directed towards art” (1986, 21). He contended that the Japanese spirit of playfulness is not necessarily contradictory to the concept of seriousness, that “[e]ven in works of utmost seriousness the spirit of playfulness creeps in, preventing the work from being too stiff-looking, and giving it a warm-hearted feeling” (1986, 87). This idea, Tsuji said, aligns well with Japanese culture’s need for balance and harmony; it also has bearing on the Japanese love of comic art that has lasted for more than a millennium and their success in “frequently joining a comic expressionism to the highest art forms” (1986, 88).

The combining of playfulness and seriousness is evident in the works of the aforementioned Toba Sōjō of the Heian era, who balanced his sober priestly duties with a “robust, uninhibited sense of humor” (Schodt 1983, 29), which sometimes broke out into scatology and ribaldry. His *Hōhigassen* (Farting contests) and *Yōbutsu Kurabe* (Phallic contests) depicted men eating sweet potatoes to build up body gas, collecting it in bags and then releasing it to much annoyance in one another’s faces, and men using their huge erect penises to perform incredible feats of strength (Schodt 1983, 30). Blyth (1959, 286) said that Bishop Toba had drawn *Shukyuzu* (Stinking fart picture) to elicit a laugh out of Emperor Eayu, who was suffering from hypochondria.

Later, Rimpa art, initiated by Koetsu (1558–1637) and Sotatsu (?–1643) and popularized by Ogata Korin (1658–1716), included humor and playfulness that advocated a “totally fresh and uninhibited vision of life and humor” that was bold and brilliant and that contained “an abbreviated language of line and color” (Baten 1995, 21). Lea Baten further labeled it “alive and humorous, and, contrary to the classics of the time, . . . subtly experimental in scope” (1995, 21).

*Zenga* (Zen pictures) dating to at least the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) in China also had a playful mood (see Furuta 2000, especially 27–36) and, like

the religion from which it originated, found room for laughter (Suzuki 1999, 11). Blyth (1959) explained that, of all religions, only Zen “is humorous and must be humorous.” The Zen painting style that brought a comic spirit to Buddhism was called *suiboku*, or ink playing. As Schodt (1983, 32) wrote: “They could suggest a profound beauty or be very off-color.” Humorous Zen pictures, as with almost all art, were meant for the upper classes.

The master of Japanese zenga in the eighteenth century was the monk and teacher Gibon Sengai (1750–1837), with whom Herbert Read (1999, xvii) could not find a “European parallel,” as he stated:

The lowliness of his subject-matter and the fluidity of his line may remind us of some of Daumier’s drawings or etchings; his satirical point of view and the swiftness of his notations sometimes suggests the *Caprichos* of Goya. But neither of these great artists has the variety of Sengai. . . . Sengai is various and he is unique. One is tempted to call him a transcendental humorist, but one then must allow for his lyricism, for his love of nature, and for his wholly serious paintings. But it is through his wit and humour that he expresses his deepest purpose, which is not so much to amuse us, as to enlighten us by means of amusement.

Sengai’s predecessor, Ekaku Hakuin (1685–1768), was also skilled in drawing humor and playfulness. Conrad Hyers (1994, 43) said that the funny aspects still appear in how Zen artists choose themes, artistic styles, mediums, and techniques. Regarding the latter, they choose paper and tools that allow for a spontaneous stroke, one that resembles an “outline, caricature, or cartoon” (Hyers 1994, 43). One eighteenth-century zenga, *Ōfuku’s Moxibustion* by Hakuin, shows a happy woman applying moxa, a painful cauterization treatment, to her husband’s hemorrhoids. Schodt (1983, 32) said the drawing implied “that a brief shock can not only cure but also open one’s mind and bring enlightenment,” goals of Zen.

Shunga (literally, “images of spring”), Japanese erotic prints with their origins between 1670 and 1690, often used humor, playfulness, and satire. Particularly some of the works of shunga master Kitagawa Utamaro

(1753–1801) were marked by an “ironic eroticism” and a sense that the “comic aspects of events being portrayed are linked to an inner sadness” (Fagioli 1997, 85). Utagamaro was actually imprisoned for satirizing the luxury of power in his shunga. Some of his successors also employed humorous content, including Kikugawa Eizan (1787–1867), singled out for “explicit anatomical designs about coitus and masturbation, and an extraordinarily comic version in caricature” (Fagioli 1997, 107); Katsushita Hokusai (1760–1849), who drew the masterpiece of grotesqueness in shunga, *Kinoe no Komatsu* (popularly recognized as *Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife*), depicting a woman “wrapped in the tentacles of octopuses who suck her” (Fagioli 1997, 108); Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1797–1861); and Kawanabe Kyōsai (1831–1889).

Kuniyoshi, his student Kyōsai, and their predecessor Hanabusa Itchō (1652–1724) stood out among Japanese artists because of their humor and playfulness. The work of Itchō, whose brushwork belonged to an off branch of the Kanō school of painting, was described by David Chibbett (1977, 196): “Humor is the keynote of Itchō’s work, and often the extremely expressive features of his figures, whether *chōnin*, peasant or Chinese sage, are wreathed in smiles. . . . Probably no other artist in Japanese history contrived to give so many different humorous facial expressions to animals.” Itchō was conscious that he was drawing humorous works, for he titled some paintings with words relating to humor and affixed *gizu* and *kyōsho* (both meaning “humorous”) to his name (Oikawa 1996, 26). His wit and gift for caricature led to his banishment to an island for twelve years after he satirized the shogun in a picture book entitled *Hyakunin Joro*.

Kuniyoshi added much humor and playfulness to his art, habitually signing some works as “playfully painted by . . .” (*giga*) (Clark 2009, 23). His oeuvre includes riddle pictures (*hanjimon*) incorporating complex satires that he drew during the Tenpō reforms era; at least thirty-six funny erotic drawings; anthropomorphic prints, one of the most popular showing sparrows acting out a brothel scene during the period when depictions of courtesans were forbidden; upside-down pictures in which a second



FIG. 1.6. *He Looks Fierce but He's a Really Great Guy*. Ichiyūsai Kuniyoshi, ca. 1847. From Timothy Clark, *Kuniyoshi: From the Arthur R. Miller Collection* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2009), 284.

face is visible when a portrait is upended; composites combining human figures to form an assembled face; other visual puzzles such as *Textile Pattern of People* (1840–1842), an entangling of fourteen men’s bodies to look like thirty-five people; scratched graffiti; and alphabets formed from bodies of fish, cats, and humans.

He, like many woodblock artists, had his own “iconography of concealment,” using “visual hints, puns, and clues deployed in *hanjimon* (visual puzzles or rebuses) and other comical prints to identify political figures and political events” (Duus 2001, 972).

Kyōsai, called the “demon of painting” (Clark 1993), was probably the best known of Japanese humoristic artists. Prolific in spite of (or because of?) his prodigious drinking of sake (see Clark 1993, 17–18), Kyōsai painted everything from scrolls to fans, book illustrations, huge theater curtains, drawings for satirical newspapers, and picture lanterns for brothels.



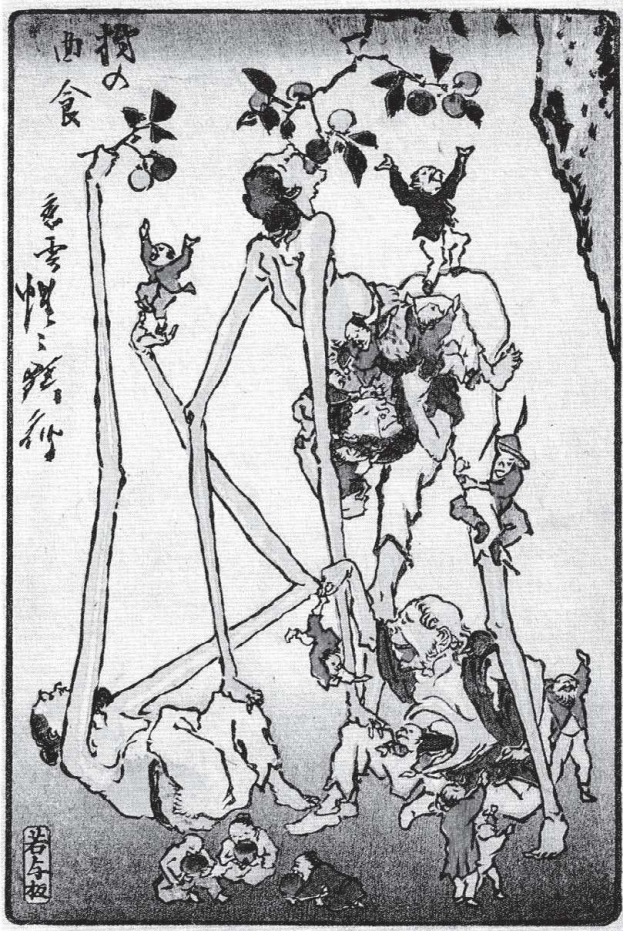


FIG. 1.7. *Acrobatic Way to Eat Fruits*. From *Hundred Pictures* by Kyōsai. Kawanabe Kyōsai, 1863–1866. From *Comic Genius: Kawanabe Kyōsai*, exhibition catalogue (1996), 216.

The subjects of his paintings covered the spectrum—demons, hell, landscapes, gods, animals, and “proverbs, farts, ink battles, and other such humorous scenes” (Oikawa 1996, 37). Regularly, he held *shogakai*, calligraphy and painting parties “at which he would turn out literally hundreds of small and medium-sized works at speed to order for paying guests at the event” (Clark 1993, 17). He relished painting comic and satirical works, sometimes in the vulgar style of Toba Sōjō, whom he copied. In 1870, he was imprisoned for several months because of comic drawings of government officials he did while very drunk (see also Oikawa 1996).

Although these three painters are singled out, there were a number of ukiyo-e and other artists who dipped into the world of playfulness and humor. Among them were Ando Hiroshige (1797–1858), known for his landscapes, but who included ten humorous drawings in his *Shadow Picture* series; Suzuki Harunobu (1725–1770),

originator of full-color *nishiki-e* prints; Maruyama Okyo (1733–1795), known for his realistic drawings, but who inserted humor in his work; Sharaku Tōshūsai (active 1794–1795), whose bust portraits included comic elements; Utagawa Toyokuni (1769–1825); Toyohiro (1773–1829); Kuwagata Shoshin (1764–1824); Kubo Shumman (1757–1820); and Watanabe Kazan (1793–1841) (Oikawa 1996, 27–28). As is apparent, ukiyo-e artists used an assortment of comic art elements in their drawings, including caricature, satire and parody, humor, and playfulness.

The same spontaneity associated with Japanese zenga has been attributed to the work of Korean court painter Kim Hong-do (1745–c.1818). With the simplicity, directness, and immediacy of his style and his commoner-oriented subject matter, Kim deviated very sharply from traditional Korean painting, to the extent that he has been lumped among the cartoonists. Pak Ki-jun (1980, 4) wrote: “He surely had a talent for cartooning. He described the scene of a *Ssirum* [wrestling match] in a light and humorous manner. Two wrestlers’ desperate looks straining to win, the looks full of excitement of the spectators around them, and its comic composition give us a hearty smile” (see also Chung 1995).

Despite present-day protestations, humor and wit also appeared in the Islamic art of Asia. Among the earliest examples were “slip-painted” ceramic wares in tenth-century Iran and Uzbekistan, containing personalized, insulting inscriptions. Some early Islamic art in Iran shows the “effects of intoxication” (Atil 1994, 17).

### Narrative and Sequence

Narrative illustrations, sequential in nature, are a key feature of modern comics and were in profusion throughout olden Asia. In India, the famous Ajanta cave paintings of the second through the eighth centuries told stories of Jataka (Buddha’s life) in terms of everyday life, complete with humor and social commentary. Aruna Rao (1995, 164) described the paintings as being “vibrant, full of life and vitality, and . . . astonishingly similar to comic art today, in that they contain topical



FIG. 1.8. Jataka Katha temple panel, Colombo, which Venerable Nayaka Thera Piyadassi described as having traits of a comic strip, with graphic narrative, humor, and exaggeration. Photo by John A. Lent, 1993.

morals, depict sequential images, and contain a wealth of expression in each scene.” In fact, much of the art relating the lives and exploits of religious and mythological figures of India is sequential narrative. For example, the walls of the more than four-hundred-year-old Sanchi Gopal Temple at Kumbakonam feature about one hundred sequential panels from the Ramayana, resembling pages of a comic book today.

Temple art a thousand or more years old in Sri Lanka takes on traits of a comic strip, possessing sequential ordering, captions of Buddhist verses, and humor in both the text and the art. The humor, according to Buddhist priest and author Venerable Nayaka Thera Piyadassi (1993), was “innocent,” based on Buddhist fables, and exaggerated. The brightly colored paintings function as panels in a graphic narrative, retelling the tales of Buddha built around ten virtues contained in the Jataka Katha. Each mural is a combination of illustrations and verses. Art historian Albert Dharmasiri (1993) said that “very humorous figures” exist in temple relief sculptures and mural paintings from the fourth century. He was likely referring to those at Sigiriya, the hill fortress dating to the time of King Kassapa (477–495) renowned for its many colorful murals and graffiti.

Narrative picture scrolls were a major form of entertainment, as well as religious and ethical education, traceable to India, from which they spread to Iran, Turkey, China, and Europe. In India, they appeared as *patanchitras* centuries before the birth of Christ (Welch 1993, 52). By the twelfth century, the *patas* were twelve- to

fifteen-foot-long, brightly illustrated stories dealing with mythology and social injustice and usually ending with a moral. Picture showmen (*mankha*) exhibited *patas* at shrines, and traveling *patuas* carried them from village to village, singing explanatory ditties they composed to accompany the sequences as the scroll was unfolded (see Ghosh 1968; Archer 1971; Rao 1995). Pita Ghosh (2003, 866) maintained that it was not unusual for these scrolls to reveal political positions on “contested issues and turbulent events.”

Sequential art was also used in other parts of India (see the numerous one-panel paintings that told stories in Noey and Temos 1994). In fifteenth-century Rajput, *The Heroine Elopes* (from a manuscript *Chandayana*, or *The story of Chanda*) tells a complete animated story in three panels: the married Chanda wants to elope with her lover Laurik, also married, who tosses a rope up to her. The maid’s encouragement and guard’s “obliging lassitude” indicate that she will succeed (Welch 1993, 336–37). A Mughal drawing, *Murder Scene* (ca. 1575–1580), tells the whole story in one panel. One of the boldest drawings done for Akbar, the story unfolds by continuous narrative from the break-in through the wall on the left, to the room with the decapitated body, to the top of the tower from which the murderer tosses the severed head. A Mughal picture book, *Hamza-nama* (*The story of Hamza*), consisting of twelve volumes and fourteen hundred large folios and made between 1557 and 1572 initially to amuse Emperor Akbar, then a teenager, used narrative to tell of the exploits of Hamza





FIG. 1.9. *The Heroine Elopes*. From the manuscript of *Laur Chanda* (The story of Chanda). Uttar Pradesh, ca. 1450–1475. Stuart Cary Welch, *India: Art and Culture, 1300–1900* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), 336.

(Welch 1993, 151, 153). An uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, Hamza has been described as a hero similar to Robin Hood (Sidhva 2002, 71).

Patuas who settled near Kali Temple in Calcutta depended on narrative at times, in both their lengthy scrolls and their single-panel prints. In 1872, Kalighat artists were favored with a delightfully sensational, real-life story, which they narrated in series of pictures: a love affair between a religious head and Elokeshi, the wife of a worker, that ended in her gruesome murder at the hands of her husband. Besides the colorful prints sold at Kali Temple, drawings recapitulating the story also featured in Calcutta newspapers (see Joshi 1986, 214; Jain 1999, 130–38). Although painted by many



FIG. 1.10. Scene of Nabin beheading Elokeshi. Kalighat painting, late nineteenth century. From Jyotindra Jain, *Kalighat Painting: Images from a Changing World* (Ahmedabad: Mapin, 1999), 44.

artists, the storytelling technique was similar. In the first series, the priest sees the beautiful Elokeshi at the Tarakeswar Shrine; he plies her with liquor; she, in turn, gives him betel nut in the second series. Her husband finds out about her adultery; as the third series shows, he reconciles with Elokeshi at first, but his torment leads him to behead her. The fourth series shows the trial, the priest's jailing, and the prison work he must perform as a gardener and an oil press operator.

Japan's experiences with illustrated narrative genres are long lived. Picture scrolls (emaki) date to the start of the previous millennium, most notably the already mentioned irreverent works of Toba Sōjō. Some of these measured as long as eighty feet. Schodt (1983, 28–29),



FIG. 1.11. Geisha reading a *kibyōshi*. From a woodblock series, *Edo komei bijin* (Edo's celebrated beauties), by Kitagawa Utamaro, ca. 1792–1793. Courtesy of Chiba City Museum and Adam L. Kern, *Manga from the Floating World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006), 50.

making a connection to modern-day comic books, wrote: “As one untied the string that bound it and began unrolling the scroll from right to left, hills faded into plains, roofs of houses dissolved to show the occupants inside, and, like the comics of today, changes in time, place, and mood were signified by mist, cherry blossoms, maple leaves, or other commonly understood symbols.”<sup>8</sup>

Later, illustrated books such as novellas about the Floating World (Tokyo's pleasure and entertainment centers) and “companion books” (*otogizōshi*) for younger and older readers appeared. However, as Adam L. Kern (2007b, 3; see also Kern 2007a) points out, they were sparsely illustrated. Kern (2007b, 4) argues that the world's first comic books came out of mid-eighteenth-century Japan, first as the “grass-script

booklets” (*kusazōshi*), classified by the color of their covers—“redbooks” (*akahon*), “blackbooks” (*kurohon*), and “bluebooks” (*aohon*). All blended words and images to tell stories plucked out of mythology, history, folk and fairy tales, and other literature.

By 1875, *kusazōshi* evolved into “yellow covers” (*kibyōshi*), five-by-seven-inch, woodblock-printed booklets of ten, twenty, or thirty pages meant for adult audiences. Kern's claim that *kusazōshi* and *kibyōshi* were the world's first comic books (2007b, 4, 7) was based on the facts that they were bound, carried dialogue, and observed sequential progression, and that they were a “medium of entertaining, sustained visual-verbal narrative, often with an emphasis on topical humor and social issues, mass produced and sold on the cheap to a broad segment of the general population and not just a narrow privileged elite” (Kern 2007b, 10; also Schodt 1996, 2). Regularly published, *kibyōshi* were among the most-read genres, individual titles selling as many as ten thousand copies. Satire and parody often were characteristics of *kibyōshi*; at least one author, Shikitei Samba (1776–1822), was arrested when he brought out a book satirizing Edo fire brigades.

Responsible for many *kibyōshi* was Santō Kyōden (1761–1816), who published his maiden book in 1778 at age seventeen; his best-known yellow cover, translated as *Playboy, Grilled Edo-Style*, was a cartoon tale of a “would-be-rake . . . who goes to extravagant lengths to make himself the talk of the town” (Hibbett 2002, 119; see also Kern 2006; and seven articles on *kibyōshi* by Kern, Glynne Walley, Ivan Grail, William Fleming, Kristin Williams, William Burton, and Akiko Walley in *International Journal of Comic Art*, Spring 2007: 1–197).

In China, the tradition of telling a story with cartoon-like illustrations goes back to at least the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 25). A 1972 excavation found two picture stories on a coffin from that time (Zhu 1990). During the Eastern Han Dynasty, door guards, designed to ward off evil, used pictures of legendary heroes. Serial stories were prominently displayed on stone slabs and frescoes during the Wei and Sui Dynasties in the sixth and seventh centuries. They were usually interpretations



of Buddhist scriptures or biographical sketches of Sakyamuni (Peng 1980, 2). Those that appeared during the Wei Dynasty were not fully developed as stories; that came about in the Sui Dynasty (Ah Ying 1982).

Other forerunners of the modern serial picture stories can be found during the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1279–1368) Dynasties, a time when fictional works flourished. Artists were asked to decorate storybooks with illustrations at the top of the pages. According to one author, the Song Dynasty book paintings had cartoon characteristics (Shi 1989, 12). During the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties, popular romantic novels carried portraits of the main characters on the front and sometimes at the beginning of each chapter (Hwang 1978, 52). Some novels were richly illustrated, with the upper half of each page featuring a picture or with an illustrated page following every page of text (see also Chiang 1959).

Nianhua, popular during New Year's, and wall paintings have also been lumped under comic art.<sup>9</sup> Nianhua were put on walls as symbols of luck or on doors to ward off evil. It was only during the Qing Dynasty when independent picture stories appeared as New Year's pictures, representing biographies, novels, operas, and even the news (see Bo 1995 for examples of nianhua, mainly Qing). James Flath (2004, 82) wrote that nianhua had a "profound effect on how people saw history." New Year's pictures were usually color prints. Before 1736, they were made up of a single panel or a story spread over several pages. After that, they were usually one page with sixteen, twenty-four, or thirty-two panels relating stories of legendary heroes and episodes of operas; these were credited with later influencing picture storybooks. The serial wall paintings had similar themes; among the most prominent were the 112 paintings portraying the life of Confucius in the temple at Qufu in Shandong Province (Hwang 1978, 52; see also Lent 1994, 280).

Indonesians claim a thousand-year history of comics by links to earlier means of creating stories with pictures. Among these were relief sculptures that decorated their ancient temples and other traditions of communicating old texts, such as *wayang kulit* (stories using

leather puppets), *wayang bēbēr* (scrolled picture stories), and *lontar* (manuscripts on palm leaves). Whether these texts reflected indigenous concerns or whether they were simply Hindu imports is a topic of debate (Berman 2001, 36; see also Weda Kusuma 1998; Tabrani 1998; Zaimar 1998). James Peacock (1968, 51), discussing wayang kulit, believed that it was both. He wrote that the grotesque, uncouth, and clumsy clowns of this genre may have originated in Java "during pre-Hindu times (before 600) and therefore may be additions to the Hindu myths, from which wajang has drawn some elements of its stories of Ardjuna and the Pandawas." James Brandon (1967, 43) felt that, no matter its origins, which was probably in the eleventh century, wayang kulit had developed into a "purely Javanese phenomenon." He showed a modern connection with comic books, stating: "In Java, for example, a child can read a comic book in which the *Mahabharata* story is drawn in wayang kulit style, or he can read a comic book in which Semar, Petruk, and Gareng, the traditional wayang clowns, cavort through twentieth-century adventures" (Brandon 1967, 166).

## Conclusion

As cautioned at the outset of this essay, attributing motives to early art is risky and open to debate. The drawers' purposes could have been many: ritualistic, celebratory (as in Chinese New Year's prints), or personal (not meant to be seen by others). As one cartoonist pointed out to me, drawings may have been funny because of the drawer's lack of artistic skills. Also, it is always tricky to translate humor from one time period or culture to another.

Nevertheless, as also already discussed, enough clues do exist in the Asian context to indicate that certain art forms were meant to elicit laughter, tell stories, or gently jab at authority. Bishop Toba's sketches, Kalighat prints, wayang puppets, Japanese woodblock prints, and other forms did all of these, even if in some instances they were peripheral purposes. Much work remains to be

done sifting through historical documents to lend credibility to information already unearthed and to dig out even more examples of predecessors to comic art.

To credit all of the examples given here as forerunners of cartoons and comics may be premature, especially because comic art scholarship has not identified exactly what makes up a cartoon or comic. There are a number of interpretations. Most researchers say that cartoons or comics are composed of aspects of humor, satire, playfulness, caricature, or narrative, as in all of the examples cited here; some argue that they blend text and images as did scrolls, *kibyōshi*, some Kalighat prints, and so on; still others contend that they know a cartoon or comic when they see one.

The uncertainty surrounding definition and the many different forms and formats (caricature, single-panel political and gag cartoons, comic strips, and comic books) allow the examples used in this chapter to be considered precursors of comic art.

## Notes

1. Early in his career, Duchamp paid much attention to Parisian caricaturists and almost exclusively drew humorous illustrations for publication. Duchamp's caricatures "traded on stereotypical social situations and remarks" and were "inspired by the relationship between the sexes" (Ades, Cox, and Hopkins 1999, 16–18; see also Tomkins 1996, 35).

2. Instances of the use of humor in European classical art are too numerous to list here. Paul Barolsky (1978) discussed scores of such artists who worked during the Italian Renaissance, while David Kunzle (1973) scoured libraries and museums all over western Europe to trace the origins of the "comic strip" in paintings and drawings. A catalogue of a National Touring Exhibition organized by the Hayward Gallery of London, *Carnavalesque* (2000), featured a collection of Western humorous and grotesque art. More specifically, Nina E. Serebrennikov (1986) focused her Ph.D. dissertation on Pieter Bruegel the Elder's reputation as a comic artist and jokester.

3. Narrative sequencing and humorous touches, all exhibiting considerable imagination in the use of composition, coloring, and subtle nuances, were common in ancient Egypt. Caricatures three thousand years ago depicted the foibles and weaknesses of masters; one shows servants carrying their drunken master home, another a woman vomiting after drinking too much, and still others animals symbolizing inverted states, which sarcastically criticized leaders and

war (see Saleh 2007, 187; Lent 2007, 140; Jbara and Lent 2007, 226–28; Mohamed Hamdy 2007, 243–47; see also James 1985).

4. Haiku is a three-line poem of five, seven, and five syllables. Stephen Addiss (1995, 14) wrote that by the eighteenth century, artists such as Takebe Sōchō (1761–1814) and Takebe Ayatari (1719–1774) had made haiga into a "special style of art, in which more modest compositions, fewer and looser brush lines, less color, and more humor are seen than in most other forms of Japanese painting."

5. An earlier historian, Sima Qian (ca. 145–ca. 90 BC), called this "poetry of complaint," which "spoke of dashed hopes and wasted talent" (Murck 2000, 3).

6. As an example of a "sarcastic quatrain" applied to a painting, Alfreda Murck (2000, 127) showed a scroll of snails crawling up a wall, with these lines of poetry inscribed:

Rancid saliva inadequate to fill a shell,  
Barely enough to quench its own thirst,  
Climbing high, he knows not how to turn back,  
And ends up stuck on the wall—shriveled.

The poet who penned those lines, Su Shi, used the snail as a metaphor for Wang Anshi, a close adviser to Emperor Shenzong (1048–1085), "whose greed had over reached his inner resources. If the humor delighted like-minded men who were disgusted with ambitious officials, those who were the target of the jokes must have been infuriated. Both witty and accessible, the quatrains circulated widely" (Murck 2000, 127–28).

7. Available books about ukiyo-e and Hokusai are far too numerous to list here. Besides those already mentioned in this essay, there are Neuer and Yoshida (1988) and Nagata (1995).

8. Famous Studio Ghibli animator Isao Takahata (1999) concurred, summarized by Brigitte Koyama-Richard (2007, 11): "[T]he *emaki* that is gradually unrolled to reveal the successive scenes produces an impression of time flow and of progression in action, as a manga divides a story into a series of boxes—and of course as in animation generally."

9. Because *nianhua* were bought and sold, they usually were not considered art in classical China. James Flath (2004, 88–89) wrote: "To discuss *nianhua* in terms of artistic conventions is therefore somewhat anachronistic, since it is unlikely that many *nianhua* designers were ever so proud as to regard themselves as artists. Nonetheless, in looking at *nianhua*, one is frequently impressed by some very convincing interpretations of the finer techniques of landscape and figure painting."

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# East Asia







## *Lianhuanhua*

*Lianhuanhua* (illustrated story books) were probably the closest Chinese equivalent to comic books until contemporary times. They have been compared to the Big Little books (Inge 2004) and Classics Illustrated comics popular in the United States in the mid-twentieth century. Yet, although there are similarities, *lianhuanhua* are different from these and other Western- and Japanese-style comic books.

First of all, *lianhuanhua* (also known as *xiaorensu*, or little man's books) are only palm size (five inches long, three and a half inches wide, and one-fourth of an inch thick). They are formatted differently, containing one illustration per page that carries a paragraph description usually at the bottom; seldom do they use balloons. For much of their long history, *lianhuanhua* had purposes and messages that deviated from those of Western comics; they were used to support social and political movements and to educate and mobilize readers. And, as such, they were under stricter control than Western comics.

The justifications for including *lianhuanhua* with comic books might be that they combine verbal and visual elements to tell stories, an often-given criterion for comics, and they resemble other pre-twentieth-century drawings labeled comics, for instance those of Rodolphe Töpffer.

*Lianhuanhua* have a long history, appearing under various names by region: *tuhuashu* (picture book) or *xiaoshu* (little book) in Shanghai, *yayashu* (children's book) in Wuhan, and *gongzaishu* (kids' book) in Guangdong (Zhong 2004, 107). Their origin is hard to pinpoint, some researchers dating their precursors to Han Dynasty stone carvings and murals (see Jie 2004; W. Jiang 2000; S. Chen 1996; Huang 1981). More likely, they came out of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Kuiyi Shen (1997, 3) attributed the introduction of lithography to China as the stimulus for development of an embryonic form of *lianhuanhua*, claiming that an illustrated narrative about the Korean rebellion in a 1884, *Dianshizai Pictorial*, may have been the first.

## Chapter 2

# China



However, this story was not published as a separate “book”; the first example of that format appeared in 1916, when the newspaper *Caobao* bound its single-page pictorial into an album (Huang and Wang 1993, 17–18). Because of the popularity of these news and current events albums, Shanghai publishers competed to find painters to draw them. Content changed when, in 1918, a few small publishers hired painters to draw illustrated storybooks of a famous Peking opera then playing in Shanghai.

Other opera-based storybooks followed, usually drawn coarsely, as Shen (2001, 101) explained:

The backgrounds in the paintings were simply copied from the stage sets, and images of the figures were also exact copies of the opera, keeping all the traditional symbolism of the objects, gestures, and make-up. The reason for this might be because a major concern of these small publishers was time. They tried to keep the publications following the schedules of the performances, so the cartoonists they commissioned were asked to draw at least ten pieces every day.

By the 1920s, novels and current social events became regular themes of these storybooks, probably the first such title being *Xue Rengui zhengdong* (Xue Rengui going on an eastern expedition), drawn by Liu Boliang, whose style became the standard. The term *lianhuanhuatuhua* was first used in 1925, to describe a World Book Company publication (Ah Ying 1957, 21). Later, the “tuhua” was dropped.

Julia Andrews (1997, 18) made connections between the spread of *lianhuanhua* in the 1920s and the ready availability of Western publications in Chinese cities, claiming that the “appearance of *lianhuanhua* was part of the Chinese response to and adoption of new forms of publishing from the West.” John Hwang (1978, 53) said that many foreign comics (strips) were translated into Chinese at the time, and that, “[b]efore long, original Chinese comics [*lianhuanhua*] modeled after the foreign ones were rolling off the press of specialized publishing houses” (see also Nebiolo 1973).

During China’s Republican period (1911–1949), stories came from popular drama, traditional fiction, and movies; those based on current running dramas or films were often drawn and printed the night of the opening performance and made available the next morning. Artists were self-taught or started out as apprentices to masters who took full credit (Andrews 1997, 18–19).

An elaborate distribution system spurred readership of *lianhuanhua* in the 1920s and 1930s. Because the small books were considered vulgar by intellectuals,<sup>1</sup> most bookstores did not stock them. Instead, publishers sold *lianhuanhua* to street booth vendors (usually on Beigongyili Street in Shanghai), who, in turn, rented them to low-income readers. Nightly, the vendors went to the small publishers to buy the two new volumes of each comic serial issued every day in two-thousand-copy pressruns. Once twenty-four volumes of a serial had appeared, publishers bound them and put them in a box to be sold as old-style books (K. Shen 1997, 5; Huang and Wang 1993, 18–19). In 1935, the publishers and street book stalls formed a comic book exchange in the Taoyuanli district of Shanghai, where new *lianhuanhua* were brought by publishers at two o’clock in the afternoon every day, from whence they would appear in street book booths by six o’clock (Huang and Wang 1993, 115–19).

Production in the 1920s and 1930s was handled by a few large and about twenty small publishers, all dependent upon a master-apprentice workforce. Because speed was essential, the commissioned masters were expected to finish works daily. In an assembly-line type of operation, the master composed and drew the main images, after which the apprentices completed the details, each person in charge of a specific aspect—clothing patterns, flora, fauna, architecture, and so on (K. Shen 1997, 5).

Quite famous among the masters were Zhu Runzhai, Zhou Yunfang, Shen Manyun, and Zhao Hongben, called the “four famous female roles” (*sida mingdan*) of *lianhuanhua*, a reference to Peking opera (K. Shen 2001, 105). Zhu, in a brief career, completed more than thirty serials, mostly adopted from novels and historical



FIG. 2.1. A *lianhuanhua* based on the Yuan Dynasty literary work *Romance of the West Chamber* by Wang Shifu. Courtesy of Wang Shuhui.

romances. Zhou, using Western art styles and modern themes, had many young followers as well; one of his major contributions was adapting Ye Qianyu's famous newspaper comic serial, *Wang xiansheng*, into a *lianhuanhua*. Shen was known for drawing opera and legendary stories, while Zhao brought progressive works to *lianhuanhua*.

As movies became popular in the late 1920s and early 1930s, they, along with theater, became the major sources for hurriedly produced *lianhuanhua* that appealed both movie patrons and those who could not afford to attend. Alongside the commercial *lianhuanhua* prominent in the 1930s were avant-garde *lianhuanhua* woodcuts, printed by leftists in relatively small editions with not much exposure (Andrews 1997, 22).

During the Japanese war (1937–1945), both the Guomindang (Nationalists) and the Communists used serial pictures to instill patriotism and resist the invaders. Hwang (1978, 53) said that the Communists used *lianhuanhua* for education and indoctrination; the Guomindang, for “didactic and patriotic purposes.” Among comics in Guomindang areas were translated foreign (especially American) productions, according to Hwang.

*Lianhuanhua* remained an important entertainment and educational vehicle throughout the 1940s; as the decade closed, in Shanghai alone more than one hundred publishers and more than two thousand street

stalls catered to *lianhuanhua*. By that time, the distribution network had expanded to Hong Kong, Singapore, and Indonesia (K. Shen 2001, 108). Yet, the heyday of *lianhuanhua* was yet to arrive.

That was to come after the Communist victory in 1949, when *lianhuanhua* were made to fit Mao Zedong's prescription for art as delineated in his “Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art” in 1942: artistic qualities are always secondary to political uses, and art should be simple, readable, and upbeat to appeal to illiterate masses. In 1950, Mao told then vice minister of publicity Zhou Yang that because *lianhuanhua* had such broad appeal, a state publishing house to issue new books should be set up. Accordingly, the Popular Pictures Press (Dazhong Tuhua Chubanshe) was established; in 1951, it merged with the People's Art Press (Renmin Meishu Chubanshe) and began publishing *Lianhuanhua Bao* (*Lianhuanhua* pictorial) the same year (Jie 2004, 25; Pan 2008, 702–3).

To prop up the *lianhuanhua* industry, in 1950, New Fourth Army cadres were sent to work as supervisors at Shanghai *lianhuanhua* publishing houses. Radical changes were made concerning artists and writers, who underwent “thought reform and ideological indoctrination,” were retrained in special art classes in 1951 and 1952, and/or were recruited from art schools. Artists were also relieved of the responsibility of writing texts; “the artist was simply presented with a set of captions



FIG. 2.2. Larger format *Lianhuanhua Bao*, no. 2, 1975. John A. Lent Collection.

for which pictures were to be supplied. This was an attempt to professionalize both writing and drawing, potentially raising the qualitative level of each. At the same time, it may have made state control of the textual content more efficient" (Andrews 1997, 23). The reorganization of *lianhuanhua* found favor among junior writer-artists who must have felt exploited working in the old workshops and private publishing outfits.

By the mid-1950s, the retraining had paid off as drawings were more refined and more Chinese. Andrews (1997, 26) wrote of this transformation: "The artists effectively limit any use of shading or chiaroscuro, thus creating a more Chinese flavor as well as a very clean image. Furthermore, they adopt conventions of traditional illustration, but combine them remarkably effectively with realistic drawing."

Significant revisions concerning content occurred; themes concerning gods, ghosts, kings, ministers, scholars, and beauties gave way to "praising the party,

Chairman Mao, socialism, heroes of the new era, workers, peasants, and soldiers" (Ma 1963). Old themes were considered "superstitious and feudalistic, unsuitable for the education of the masses" (Hwang 1978, 53). Post-1949 *lianhuanhua* fell into categories of those molding "the heroic image of the proletariat"; "dealing with Chinese Communist revolutionary history and contemporary reconstruction campaigns"; recounting traditional folklore; and recording the history of international communist movements (Hwang 1978, 57, 59).

*Lianhuanhua* became a major propaganda arm of the party and state in the 1950s and were to be "strengthened in order to occupy the consciousness of the youth" (Jiang Weipu, quoted in Pan 2008, 703). That this happened is visible in the growth in numbers of titles and total circulation: 670 titles and 21 million copies in 1952, to 2,300 titles and more than 100 million copies in 1957 (Chiang 1959). Between 1949 and 1963, 12,700 different titles with a combined circulation of 560 million appeared.

The situation drastically changed at the onset of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when the *lianhuanhua* of the seventeen years since the Communist victory were criticized as feudalist, capitalist, and revisionist, and many were burned as "poisoned weeds," their artists and editors criticized, censored, and sent to the countryside to be reformed. An article in *Shanghai Art World Criticized Material Collection No. 9* published during the Cultural Revolution promoted *lianhuanhua* as important propaganda agents for Maoist thought, but lamented that for seventeen years their artists had neglected the class struggle, spread "poisoned" ideas, and pushed for the revival of capitalism in China. The article reported that in 1962, Minister of Culture Zhou Yang gave the Shanghai People's Art Press paper to print more than 27 million copies of the *lianhuanhua Sanguo Yanyi* (Three Kingdoms stories), blamed for spreading feudalism in China as well as in Hong Kong, India, Macao, and elsewhere through exportation (Jie 2004, 37).

For five years (1966–1970), *lianhuanhua* were published only infrequently, but then, on September 11, 1971, Zhou Enlai called publishing leaders together and

told them to revive *lianhuanhua* as soon as possible to solve the next generation's lack of spiritual nutrition. Art and literature policy was controlled by the "Gang of Four," and *lianhuanhua* was what they ordered—sample operas (eight operas ordered by Mao's wife, Jiang Qing), heroes' stories, criticisms of Lin Biao and Confucius, the two class/two roads struggle, Red Little Guards and Red Guards, intellectual youth going to the countryside, industrial lessons from the Daqing oil wells, and farming lessons from Dazhai (village) revolutionary struggle stories (Jie 2004, 43). If a study situation was depicted, many of Mao's books would be on bookshelves, and all those pictured in the *lianhuanhua* would be holding Mao's books. If a farm harvest was shown, many bags and piles of grains and fertilizers were visible, as were farming machines, all neatly lined up.

Cultural Revolution *lianhuanhua* both criticized party and state enemies and praised heroes of the revolution to the extreme. Exemplifying their emphasis on messages of loyalty, humble self-sacrifice, and attendance to duty, Frederic Moritz (1973, 9) cited *Twenty-Four Tales of Filial Piety*, a picture storybook about a young boy who lowers his body onto the ice to melt a hole so that his starving father can fish.

*Lianhuanhua* came in two versions—one illustrative and "cartoonized," used to criticize its subjects; the other photographic, meant to espouse the achievements of heroes (Jie 2004, 42). All *lianhuanhua* started with a page of Mao's words; although not a rule, it became the customary practice. Additionally, some published the words of Marx, Lenin, Engels, or Stalin; the content determined who was to be quoted. When, in October 1972, the Shanghai People's Art Press published a film version of a *lianhuanhua*, *A Fu*, based on a Vietnamese movie of the same title, Ho Chi Minh's sayings appeared on the first page (Jie 2004, 42).

Hwang (1978, 66–67) said that the artists worked under strict guidelines that stipulated the use of captions, not balloons (because captions allow for more narrative information, while balloons are less aesthetic), the emphasis on many close-ups of heroes and heroines, and the centering of the main character in the pictures.

Ziping Jie (2004, 44), describing the "three outstanding" principles of *lianhuanhua*, said that all positive characters must look outstanding; among positive characters, heroes must look outstanding; among heroes, the major hero must look outstanding. Other rules required portraying enemies of the masses with sinister looks, drawing scenes and minor characters to serve the main proletarian hero or heroine, and employing graphic devices of contrast to reflect the relationship between the hero or heroine and the enemy. Colors were effectively used: enemies and other undesirable characters were drawn in cold grays; heroes were given bright colors (Jie 2004, 45).

One genre, called "criticize movement *lianhuanhua*," commented negatively on targeted movements and organizations. These books used very serious words, mixing satirical commentary on contemporary situations with ancient stories. Their language consisted of slogans used as criticism, their images drawn in an orderly fashion and appearing as quickly drawn cartoons (Moritz 1973, 9).

Although rare during the first half of the Cultural Revolution, *lianhuanhua* regained favor once the Gang of Four had secured complete control over them. Altogether, 1,500 *lianhuanhua* titles were printed in more than 700 million copies during that decade; more than a third of the titles came from Heilongjiang province and Shanghai.

After Mao's death in 1976, *lianhuanhua* publishing was reorganized once again. Exiled older artists returned to the studios, joined by young drafters; room was made for freelance artists' works; strident propaganda was replaced by very subtle messages; styles of art became more diverse; and, with Deng Xiaoping's rule after 1979, rigid controls were abandoned (Andrews 1997, 31). The popularity of the miniature books resulted in huge profits for publishing houses between 1978 and 1984; in 1983 alone, 2,100 titles appeared, surmounting 630 million copies, or about one-fourth of China's total book production that year (Jie 2004, 33; quoted in Pan 2008, 706). The number rose to 800 million the following year.



Prominent painter Wang Wei said that it was an honor to draw *lianhuanhua* in the early 1980s, and it was profitable. He said that, for his work with a drama troupe at the time, he was paid 39 to 41 yuan monthly, but he received 120 yuan to draw one *lianhuanhua*. Discussing his *lianhuanhua* experiences, Wang Wei (2012) recalled:

I used different styles (brush, pen, etching, etc.), depending on the content. If I drew ancient stories, I used brush and long lines. For war stories, I used pen. Stories were given to us by the publishers. I did much research on the subjects, people's dress, customs, etc. I'd design everything—conceptualize, sketch, and ink the story. A draft then would be drawn for the editor's approval. He corrected the work, we would discuss it, and I would do a new version. The whole process was taken very seriously. All *lianhuanhua* artists were very serious; there were different values then. Every detail and style was carefully done; versions were drawn over and over.

Wang Wei related how his *lianhuanhua* (and the industry generally) dwindled in circulation by the mid-1980s. In 1980, his first title, *36 Strategies*, sold 1.8 million copies; a second, *Xue Zhan Shahe*, in 1984, 850,000 copies; and a third in 1985, 340,000 copies. He blamed the entry of Japanese manga into China in 1984 as the main reason for the lessened interest in *lianhuanhua*.

But others blamed the 1986–1987 crash of the *lianhuanhua* market on the widespread availability of television sets and videocassette players; the diminished quality of the books, as publishers and artists quickened their production pace to meet reader demands (Cao 2002; Yu 2000; Lin 1997; Hong 1995); and the transfer of responsibility for distribution from the government, with its vast resources, to the publishing houses themselves. The market reforms also affected bookstores, which would not buy unprofitable or marginally profitable books without government subsidy (H. Xu 1999, 53; quoted in Pan 2008, 706–7).

State publication bureaus attempted to save the industry by regulating publishing houses and the books'

quality, but to little avail. In 1987, total sales of *lianhuanhua* amounted to less than 80 million copies (W. Jiang 1989, 8). Sales dropped considerably more in the 1990s, and *lianhuanhua* began to become collectibles rather than rich reading material. Collecting *lianhuanhua* for profit escalated, encouraging some renowned presses to republish old volumes.

In recent times, the line between *lianhuanhua* and comics has blurred, leading to the coinage of the term “cartoon-*lianhuanhua*.” Lingling Pan (2008, 713) explained:

Several implications underlie the mixture of usage. First, it shows the compromise of traditional *lianhuanhua* with overseas comic art. Since the tastes of Chinese children and youth have been shaped largely by imported cartoons or comic books lately, the publishers tried to win back readers by catering to their preferences. Second, it signals the innovations within the *lianhuanhua*, which aims at competing with the imported cartoons or comic books by learning from their artistic style and marketing strategy. Lastly, the term “cartoon-*lianhuanhua*” disclosed the direction that the pictorial book industry works toward in boosting the domestic market, i.e., while learning from overseas counterparts, certain elements of the traditional *lianhuanhua* would be maintained.

### **Manga and *Xinmanhua***

The popularity of Japanese manga beginning in the 1980s has had much to do with how artists, audiences, and the authorities in China have perceived comics. Older cartoonists, most of whom had drawn humor or political/social commentary cartoons for decades, labeled manga style as “ugly” (Liao 2002; H. Chen 2009), damaging, and irrelevant, having a pernicious effect upon the Chinese style (He 2001; Zheng 2001). Younger artists, who grew up reading pirated manga, favored this drawing style because it appeared to be modern, was more action oriented, captured the changing cultural trends in China, and sometimes provided

opportunities for international recognition through manga competitions.

Youth comics audiences also developed new tastes in the 1990s, looking to the West and Japan for lifestyle, fashion, and entertainment models as they sought to develop their own identities in an open market economy and as the first generation of the one-child policy. Manga and anime loomed large in their search, noticeable in the immense popularity that manga/anime-based cosplay attained throughout the country.

Matthew M. Chew and Lu Chen (2010, 173) believe that the pirated publication of more than six million copies of *Saint Seiya* in 1990 and 1991 set off the manga and anime boom in China, mainly because it appealed to young adults as well as children. The development of a huge and fast-growing manga piracy industry then resulted. According to these authors:

Because copyrighted original manga publications were costly, inaccessible, and written in the Japanese language, they could not possibly satisfy the growing demand of Chinese audiences. At the same time, Japanese publishers did not have incentives to expand operations, distribute products, and glocalize contents for any anime and manga markets outside Japan. Moreover, the Chinese state was still unaware of the potential social impact of anime and manga and hence did not try to regulate their circulation in China. (Chew and Chen 2010, 173)

Pirate publishers, the most successful of which was Sichuan Xiwang Shudian (Sichuan Hope Bookstore), employed various strategies to keep manga prices low for young readers with little disposable income—dividing books into less costly smaller volumes and building a network of specialized pirated manga bookstores and makeshift stalls across the country. Sichuan Xiwang Shudian also published the comics magazine *Huashu Dawang* (Comic king), initially consisting of the latest pirated manga series, but soon afterward including lianhuanhua and locally drawn manga-style comics (xinmanhua). The popularity of the latter led to imitators and to the birth of the xinmanhua genre, described by

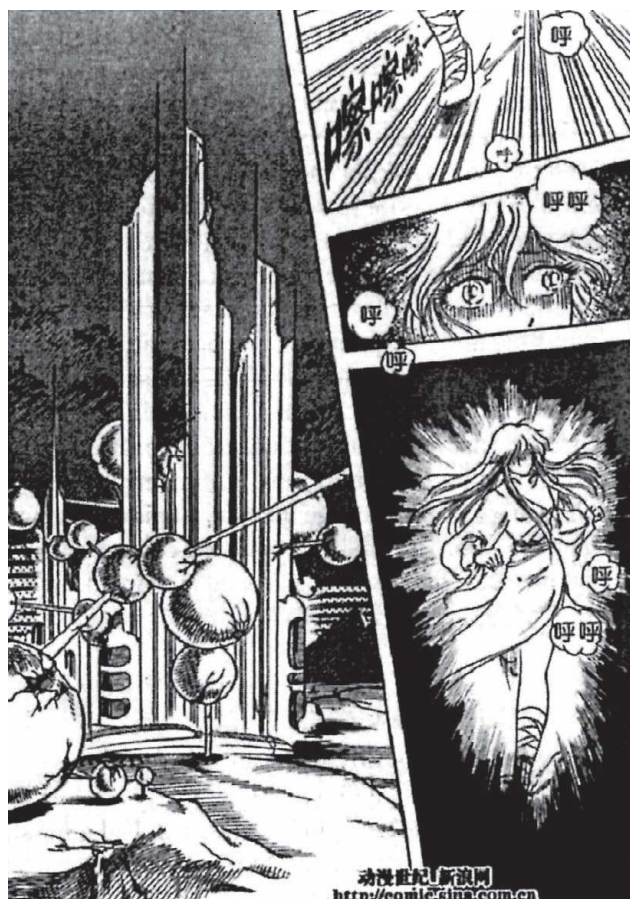


FIG. 2.3. Xinmanhua work by Yan Kai in *Huashu Dawang*.

Chew and Chen (2010, 174–75) as a contrast to lianhuanhua because xinmanhua was primarily drawn in the early period by

manga fans, white-collar workers, and students without any education in the fine arts or professional training in the comic arts. These young artists took comic drawing as a part-time hobby; they were not organized into work units or professional workshops. . . . Because most of the xinmanhua artists took popular manga as their models, they tended to produce fictional stories, love fantasies, and fairy tale-like contents; their drawing style tended to be less realistic and more embellished than that of lianhuanhua. The images of characters in xinmanhua were as exaggerated as those of manga. . . . Xinmanhua's use of camera style motion and filmic perspectives also distinguishes it from the static lianhuanhua perspective.

Some artists, such as Jiang Ling and Yao Feila, who developed their own localized manga styles, started out

imitating manga to the smallest detail; a few others even copied pictures from original manga and incorporated them almost unmodified in their own works.

In 1993 and 1994, Japanese manga publishers filed complaints with the Chinese government regarding such piracy, resulting in the forced closure of Sichuan Xiwang Shudian, the banning of *Huashu Dawang*, the subduing of piracy for a while, and, in 1995, the implementation of the 5155 Project. Under the auspices of the General Administration of Press and Publication, 5155 “constructed five major comics publishers within three years to publish fifteen series of comic books and establish five comics magazines” (Chew and Chen 2010, 176–77). The most influential and longest surviving of the new comics magazines were *Shaonian Manhua* (Youth comics) and *Beijing Katong* (Beijing cartoon).<sup>2</sup> All five magazines benefited greatly from the already established markets and talent pools inherited from the pirates, and from their government affiliation and funding, which allowed them to legally obtain copyrighted manga. Although, in their initial stage, the 5155 comics filled pages with much manga content, they also encouraged non-Japanese manga styles and content made up of something other than “dull historical stories of thousands of years ago” (*Comics Forum* 1996, 4).

For example, *Beijing Katong* featured stories such as “Chinese Ghost Woman”; “Handsome Boy,” who “cheats in the singing competition, but still gets the girl”; and “Nie Shuer,” about a teenage, “accident-prone martial-arts ingénue” (*Comics Forum* 1996, 4). A favorite 1996 comic book was *Soccer Boy*, a sixty-part saga about a boy who makes the national team under the authoritarian guidance of a coach determined to “overcome the laziness and lack of discipline that plagues the spoiled kids . . . growing up in the era of China’s one-child policy” (Mufson 1996, A31). *Soccer Boy*, the product of the government-favored Sichuan Children’s Publication Press, was a reaction to government and public outcries about the cultural “malnutrition” resulting from Chinese children’s digestion of foreign comics (Mufson 1996, A32).

The 5155 Project allowed the authorities to exercise more control over content considered harmful to

Chinese morals and social norms. The prevalence of teenage love affairs and depictions of sex in manga were especially controversial and were often the subjects of media attention. Although antipornography laws carried severe penalties from fines and imprisonment to the death penalty, the “distasteful” manga, through underground and Internet channels, continued to thrive well into the first decade of the twenty-first century. Particularly of concern were boys’ love (*danmei*, or male-male relationships) manga (Liu 2009).

Xinmanhua in the late 1990s tried to distance itself from manga, replacing sex and violence with educational values, resetting love stories in ancient rather than contemporary China, and encouraging non-Japanese styles. Some xinmanhua artists turned to Taiwanese and Hong Kong popular culture or other areas such as fashion illustration for styles and content. In some rare instances, artists such as Zhao Jia, Weng Ziyang, and Quan Yingsheng incorporated traditional Chinese painting in their comics. All seemed to be going well: popular xinmanhua series in the five official magazines were being republished as single comic books; some artists, such as Jiang Ling, Xiao Yanfei, Hu Rong, and Yao Feila, were winning awards in China and abroad; and xinmanhua styles were being made “more technically mature, localized, and diversified” (Chew and Chen 2010, 180).

And then, just as quickly as the 5155 Project had altered Chinese comics generally for the better, a series of circumstances in 2000 and 2001 steered them in other, less-than-ideal directions. Among these changes were the declining interest in printed comics, the drying up of the 5155 official magazines, the revival of pirated manga, and the ushering in of new comics media such as info-magazines and the Internet. By 2000, the official magazines were struggling financially, as much of their revenue was siphoned off to the sponsoring officials, leaving little for the artists, who drifted off to other employment. With dwindling staffs and the inability to meet payrolls, these magazines were all gone by 2005. The revival of new editions of pirated manga was also blamed for the demise of the official magazines. In the early 2000s, unauthorized copies of copyrighted

Chinese translations of manga from Taiwan and Hong Kong found their way to the mainland. These comics, although half the size of standard comics published in China, were sometimes five times the price because of their higher quality. In 2002, a new version of pirated comics appeared, as described by Chew and Chen (2010, 181):

This version minimized the original pages and then printed four pages on a 32-fold page. These so-called *si-pin-yi* (four pages in one page) pirated books were of low quality, because the pictures were greatly minimized and the words were barely readable. The reading system was problematic because on each page, the lines read right to left, but the four pages read left to right. It was so confusing that the pirate publishers had to mark the correct reading order on each page of all manga.

Despite their poor quality, the *si-pin-yi* also sold for high prices. At the same time, with more readers moving to the digital arena, pirated anime fell sharply in price and replaced pirated manga. As the bottom fell out of the pirated manga market, the entire printed comics industry plummeted in China.

While all of this was happening, new platforms for xinmanhua were ushered in, such as info-magazines. Begun in 1998, these semilegal publications collected materials on manga and anime from Japanese print magazines and the Internet and translated the information into Chinese. Chew and Chen (2010, 183) reported that, between 1998 and 2006, info-magazines were the major outlet for xinmanhua content, although in limited amounts. *Manyou* (Comic fans), which devoted more of its space to xinmanhua than did other info-magazines such as *Dongman Shidai* (Animation and comic times) and *Xinganxian* (Comics and ani's reports), attracted many of the artists who had previously published in the official magazines. Because of its concentration on xinmanhua, *Manyou* gained state financial support in 2008 and was the lone survivor from among the first group of info-magazines. Chew and Chen (2010, 184–85) wrote: “The commercialized nature of *Comic Fans* has

influenced the direction of xinmanhua development. The magazine targeted female teenagers and published comic styles and contents that catered to this particular market. As a result, a large portion of the xinmanhua works carried in the magazine either resembled Japanese shōjō manga or followed the most recent fad in the Japanese manga scene.”

In addition to info-magazines, the Internet was the other new vehicle for comics dissemination in the 2000s. No doubt, the Internet played a major role in the decreased sales of printed comics in China, but it also helped xinmanhua to survive, through *oekaki* bulletin board systems that allow budding cartoonists to create, using computer graphics, and then post their works; online forums that accommodate comics and animation fans; and websites that provide space for alternative comics.

Both online and in printed xinmanhua, a common theme of young cartoonists is the upheaval of Chinese society caused by modernization. One such popular online work in the late 2000s was Liu Gang's *Suicide Rabbit*, which portrayed with “gentle humor the million little abuses suffered by Chinese people as their society endures a bumpy transformation” (Cody 2007). Another strip, by Luo Yonghao, published online and in a literary magazine, followed a fly character trapped in a glass bottle trying to escape, an allusion to the dilemma of Chinese people trying to follow their heart, truth, and honesty instead of the increasing materialism of Chinese society. As another example, Benjamin le Soir's comic books (*One, Orange, Remember, Savior*, etc.), published in Chinese and French, dealt with suicide, mental disturbance, madness, and the belief that materialism and money are not the best paths to happiness.

Some of this type of fare comes from self-publishing collectives producing underground comics (e.g., Cult Youth and Special Comics). Coco Wang, a Chinese cartoonist living in England,<sup>3</sup> described these collectives as consisting of artists who make a modest living working in the gaming/animation industry and who spend most of their free time simply drawing comics and having fun exchanging and criticizing one another's works. Coco





FIG. 2.4. Cover of Quan Yingsheng's comic book *Genghis Khan*. Use of traditional water-and-ink painting. Courtesy of Quan Yingsheng.

(quoted in Gravett 2008) said that these young people stay in their rooms for long periods of time doing comics because they have “computers, DVDs, online games, internet, take-away menus (of many restaurants), [and] phone numbers of convenience stores,” some of which deliver. Some of them print their work in book form, but, because most of what they do is considered unsuitable by the state and not commercial enough for investors, it goes largely unnoticed.

However, there have been commercial successes among recent Chinese comic books, such as Zheng Jun's two-volume graphic novel *Tibetan Rock Dog* (2009) and the comics of Quan Yingsheng. A popular rock musician himself, Zheng Jun fashioned a story about a dog who grew up in a Buddhist temple in Tibet, facing hardships while pursuing his dream of being a rock star in Beijing. The book sold more than one hundred thousand copies and was spun off into a movie, dolls, and other merchandise (*People's Daily Online* 2009).

Quan Yingsheng, founder and head of Beijing Heavycomics Culture and Media Company (founded in 1999), has succeeded with a diverse mix of comics. One of the two largest of several hundred comics companies in China (the other being Shenjie Comics in Tianjin), Beijing Heavycomics brings out manga, *xinmanhua*, and *manhua*, the latter distinctly Chinese in its story lines and aesthetic qualities. Perhaps most unique of the young artist's endeavors is the application of traditional water-and-ink painting to comic books such as *Cheng ji si han* (Genghis Khan), *Chan lai chan qu* (Buddhahood twines), *Qi gain an zai* (Beggar boy), and *Geshaer wang* (King of Gesar). Quan (2011) said that he intertwines comics and traditional painting to disprove people's perception that “if you draw comics, you cannot draw as an artist.”

Working on the principle of “reducing the manga and switching attention to the Chinese style,” Quan (2011) has published a long line of comic books based on themes of Chinese adventure, history, love, sports, detective stories, and so on. Many are multivolume collections. Quan's water-and-ink comics fare better financially than those he does in manga style. Because there are many small publishers printing manga-style books in China and the international manga market is already glutted, Beijing Heavycomics has little room for expansion in this field. On the other hand, the company's water-and-ink comic books, because of their uniqueness and the small pool of highly skilled artists who can draw them, have become popular in China and anticipate increased international sales (see Lent and Xu 2012).

Overall, Chinese comic books needed a boost when the government got heavily involved again in the mid-2000s, partly as a reaction against the prevalence of foreign works and partly as a potentially important investment. Economists and national leaders, perhaps following the South Korean example of a decade earlier, propped up comics and animation as the “third pillar” of the economy. During the Eleventh Five-Year Projection for Social and Economic Development (2006–2010), the comics and animation sector was listed as a key cultural industry to be developed at the national level. This

development had already begun by 2006, when more than twenty provinces designated comics and animation as a “new industry,” nine cities had established their own production bases with preferential policies, and many animation/comics extravaganzas such as festivals, competitions, and conferences had taken place. By 2012, at least a hundred annual festivals had been established, along with special museums, centers, theme parks, thousands of studios, and hundreds of educational and training programs. Most of the emphasis of these state-backed projects was placed on animation. Although the quantity of comics and animation was more than sufficient to meet market demand, the quality of the work often suffered because of rushed jobs, an overreliance on software, and a lack of good storytelling techniques.

Despite this preferential treatment, China’s comic book industry still lags behind that of some of its Asian neighbors; it has been described by cartoonist Ru An as “a teenager; it’s young, but pretending to be old. But it must [mature] quickly and catch up to the others [Japan and South Korea]” (quoted in Cha 2007).

### Humor/Cartoon Magazines and Comic Strips

Pictorial newspapers and magazines dating from the late nineteenth century played vital roles in the creation of a comics tradition in China. The first pictorial magazine was *Ying Huan Pictorial* (1877–1880), edited by a Britisher; it was followed by about a dozen others during the latter years of the Qing Dynasty. The pictorials, as well as most of the seventy newspapers and magazines that appeared in China between 1875 and 1911, often carried “funnies,” “burlesques,” “current pictures,” and “emblems,” all forms of comic art.

Standing out among the cartoonists who were active in the aftermath of the 1911 revolution was Qian Binghe, who worked for the daily *Minquan huabao* (Civil rights pictorial), but he also contributed cartoons to other periodicals. He was particularly noted for a comic strip published in *Minquan huabao* and *Minguo xinwen* (Republic news) in 1913. Entitled *A Hundred*

*Appearances of the Old Gibbon*, the strip poked fun at President and would-be emperor Yuan Shikai, using the rebus of gibbon (*yuan* in Chinese) to do so (K. Shen 2001, 109).

China had at least three cartoon/humor periodicals during its formative period of comic art: the *China Punch* (1867–1868, 1872–1876); *Puck, or the Shanghai Charivari* (April 1871–November 1872); and *Shanghai Puck* (also known as *Bochen huaaji*, or *Bochen’s Comic Pictorial*) (1918–1919). As their names testify, all emulated either Britain’s *Punch* (1842–2002) or the United States’ *Puck* (1871–1918). There may have been other cartoon magazines in the Qing and Republican eras, but because they usually appeared in English, they and other foreign-language or foreign-owned periodicals are scarcely mentioned in the histories (Rea 2013, 392).

The *China Punch* and *Puck, or the Shanghai Charivari* had other similarities besides imitating London’s *Punch*. Both had short lives, were amateurishly produced, depended on literary and artistic contributions from China’s tiny Anglophone community, employed a type of whimsy closely related to farce, and promoted readers’ prejudices and cultural stereotypes. Although they took a condescending attitude toward the Chinese, they also poked fun at the Irish, Germans, Portuguese, and other British rivals in the region (Rea 2013, 407). One writer, reporting in 1877, said that for the most part the British ridiculed themselves in *Puck*, although occasionally they made fun of Chinese ceremonies (Parton 1877, 196).

Published in Hong Kong, the *China Punch* was a subsidiary of the *China Mail*, founded in 1845 as the “Official Organ of All Government Notifications in Hong Kong.” The *China Punch* labeled its parent newspaper “The China Snail.” One of the delusions *Punch* continually sought to puncture was that Hong Kong was a city of dreams (Rea 2013, 398). The regular contents of the *China Punch*, according to Christopher Rea (2013, 399), included “caricatures of colonial government officials and their Chinese counterparts, roundups of fictitious social events, parodic telegrams and letters to the editor, witty rhymes on financial, political, commercial and social topics, and copious one-off puns.”



FIG. 2.5. The China Punch 1, no. 1, May 28, 1867.

*Puck, or the Shanghai Charivari* was issued by F. & C. Walsh, a British printing and stationery firm, on April 1 (April Fools' Day), 1871. Like the *China Punch*, *Puck* delighted in quoting or referring to Shakespeare. The title of the magazine, *Puck, or the Shanghai Charivari*, incorporated parts of two Western humor journals, although it is unlikely, because of time constraints, that the magazine was spun off from the American *Puck*, whose inaugural issue came out less than a month earlier. Published every three months, there are seven known numbers of *Puck, or the Shanghai Charivari*.

Early in the Republican period (1918), *Shanghai Puck*, also called *Bochen huaji* (*Bochen's Comic Pictorial*), appeared as a bilingual (English and Chinese) monthly, this time the product of a Shanghai cartoonist, Shen Bochen (1889–1919). Only four numbers, each circulating about ten thousand copies, were published before Shen's premature death in 1919. Throughout its brief existence, *Shanghai Puck* incorporated ideas from, and exchanged caricatures and cartoon styles with, other *Punch* and *Puck* magazines globally; in some instances, cartoons from the American *Puck* were unashamedly copied in almost all their details, to which Chinese elements were attached (Wu 2013, 372–73).

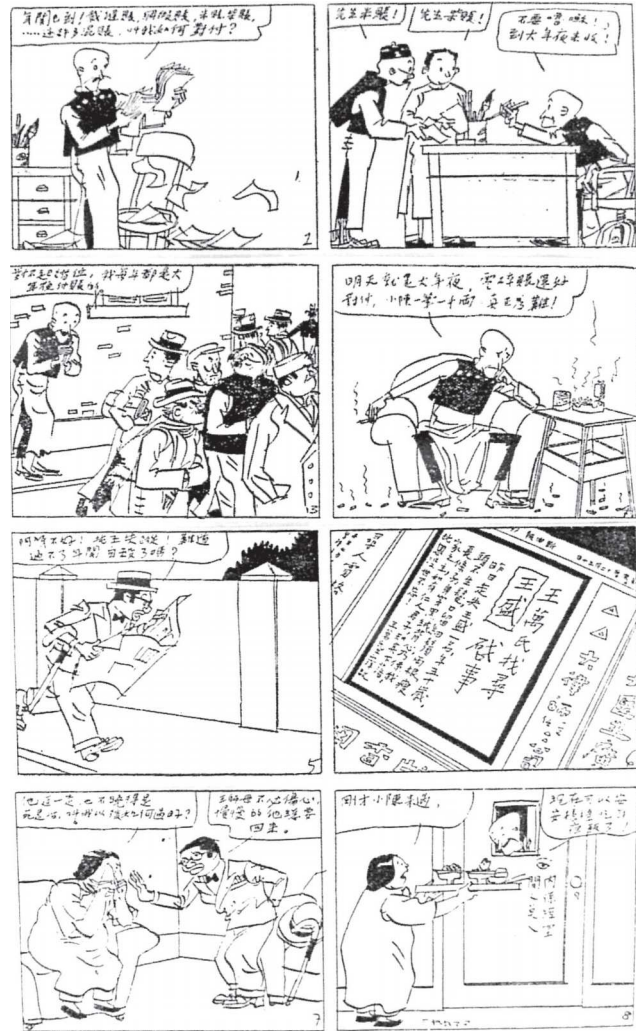


FIG. 2.6. The popular comic strip *Wang xiansheng* (Mr. Wang) by Ye Qianyu. "Avoiding Creditors at the New Year's."

Shen (1918, 2; quoted in K. Shen 2001, 109) gave his magazine's responsibilities as "first, to give advice and warning to both governments of the south and the north, and spur them to work in concerted efforts to create a unified government; second, to let Westerners understand Chinese culture and customs, and thus, raise the positions of China in the world; and third, to promote the new morality and practices and discard the old." In line with these objectives, most of the cartoons related to current political issues such as colonialism, imperialism, militarism, and China's weaknesses and victimization; the use of English helped Westerners to know China better and served as a safety device for Shen, allowing him to voice more critical statements



in a language probably unfamiliar to most government officials (Wu 2013, 378).

Later, another cartoon/comics magazine came out of the Shanghai Manhuahui (Shanghai comic and cartoon society), founded in 1927. The following year, the young cartoonists who started the society brought out *Shanghai manhua* (Shanghai sketch), which also published paintings, photographs, and essays. The editors stated in the inaugural issue: “We don’t want to be a guard-dog of the old morality in order to curse evil, and don’t have interest in praising vanity fair either. . . . Our effort is to express our feelings about the great and colorful life in Shanghai.” Less political than some of its predecessors, *Shanghai manhua* concentrated on comic strips, the most famous being *Wang xiansheng* (Mr. Wang), drawn by Ye Qianyu (Ye Lunqi).

*Wang xiansheng* was a four- to eight-panel strip built around a “triangular-headed, middle-class philistine, proud possessor of all the typical Chinese vices” (J. Chen 1938, 312). Dealing with the sensations of modern urban life (luxury, gluttony, deceit, pleasure seeking) coupled with accompanying social problems (conformism, gambling, hunger for social success, and lack of education and culture), the strip was the first in China to feature a “true comic strip hero” (K. Shen 2001, 113). Ye had a keen sense of characterization, which he mentioned when later remembering the launch of his career: “Although I was motivated more by need than artistic fulfillment, I learned how to pick out that tell-tale trait that gives life to a character and—how to make my audience laugh or cry over it” (*Asiaweek* 1982b, 26).

When *Shanghai manhua* ceased publishing in 1930, *Wang xiansheng* moved to *Shidai huabao* (Modern miscellany), which Ye edited. Ye spread the strip around after 1932. For *Tuhua chenbao* (Picture morning news), he did the series *Wang xiansheng biezhuang* (Another story of Mr. Wang), and he later drew *Story of Mr. Wang in the South* for Guangzhou and *Story of Mr. Wang in the North* for Tianjin. *Tuhua chenbao* kept the series alive for 182 issues (Xie 1991, 88).



FIG. 2.7. The first issue of *Modern Sketch*, 1934.

Cartoon magazines thrived in the mid-1930s; about twenty were published in Shanghai alone. Besides those already mentioned, they included *Modern Sketch*, *Manhua shenghuo* (Comics and life), *Duli manhua* (Oriental puck), *Manhuajie* (Comic circle), *Independent Cartoons*, *Zhongguo manhua* (China cartoon) and *Time Cartoon*, the latter published as a reaction to Japan’s invasion of Manchuria in 1931, which it described as a “tragic farce” (quoted in J. Chen 1938, 308). Some magazines were reincarnations of titles that had been forced to close earlier for various reasons. For example, *Manhuajie* started up as the successor to *Time Cartoon* when the latter was suspended in 1936 because of its political stance, and *Manhua shenghuo* was the new version of the monthly *Cartoon Life*, closed by the government in 1935 because of its leftist viewpoints (Lent 1994, 285). *Manhua shenghuo* also closed after three months because of government charges that it advocated class struggle, opposed the government, and promoted the Bolshevik revolution.



Considered the cartoon magazine of the highest quality was *Modern Sketch*, started in 1934 and edited by Lu Shaofei, noted for its use of several color pages and for publishing the cartoons of more than a hundred Chinese cartoonists (see Z. Wang 1935, 3). A major cartoonist at the time, Jack Chen, gave the circulation of some cartoon magazines as high as forty thousand. He said that they were targeted primarily to men, because they indulged in some “Elizabethan coarseness,” explaining, “[t]here is necessarily a certain amount of eroticism, influenced to a great extent by such journals as the American *Esquire*, but with an element of quite Chinese abandon” (J. Chen 1938, 311).

Most of the second-generation master cartoonists (those born in the 1910s and early 1920s) started their careers on these humor magazines while they were still teenagers or college students (Huang 2001). Among them were Chen Huiling, Ding Cong, Mai Fei, Te Wei, and Liao Bingxiong. Describing cartooning for those magazines and dailies in the 1930s and 1940s as “a hungry situation,” Liao Bingxiong (2002) said: “I found this Shanghai cartoon magazine (*Time Cartoon*) in a bookstore and starting sending cartoons to it. I became a Shanghai cartoonist after that. They and other periodicals could not pay. I was very poor, could not afford to take the bus. I walked to the newspaper to hand in my works, and I seldom got payment. What payments there were, were very small. My hope was to get some money so I kept sending cartoons.” Mai Fei (2006), whose first cartoon appeared in *Zhongguo manhua* in 1935, said that he was a second-year art student at the time and became “famous” among fellow students because he was published.

Other outlets for cartoonists were provided by major journals such as *Dongfang zazhi* (Eastern miscellany), *Lun yu* (Analects), and *Yuzhou feng* (Cosmos wind), magazines that were increasing their solicitation of cartoons, and newspapers that had added special cartoon/comics sections (Hung 1990, 42). The supplements that appeared in Chinese dailies by the 1930s occasionally included a children’s page. These were particularly common in northern China, starting with Tianjin’s *Social*



FIG. 2.8. Self-portrait by Feng Zikai. Courtesy of Feng Yiyin.

*Welfare* in 1929. All such supplements included cartoons and strips (Cheng 1931, 103–4).

Among the trend-setting artists whose comic strips and cartoons appeared in these publications of the 1920s and 1930s, Feng Zikai and Zhang Leping must be singled out. Feng Zikai contributed much theory and technique to the new field through scores of books and countless drawings. In fact, the term *manhua* (a direct translation of the Japanese manga) was first applied to his work by Zheng Zhenduo when Feng’s cartoon *Zikai manhua* appeared in the respected literary journal *Wenxuezhoubao* (Literary review) in 1925. Feng is credited with giving cartoons some much-needed respect, because he contributed them regularly to prestigious literary journals and the influential dailies of the 1920s. *Zikai manhua* was extremely popular because of its portrayal of “lovable, mischievous children” in an original style that combined the traditional Chinese brush technique with contemporary social settings, humor, and religious messages (Hung 1990, 46–47). He also introduced an important new genre to modern Chinese image literature with his literary comic strips based on the best modern Chinese literature. In the 1930s, he moved from idyllic children’s cartoons to social cartoons, although his works were not “ephemerally political” like those of his contemporaries.

Zhang Leping is credited with creating China’s most important and longest-lasting comic strip, *Sanmao*



FIG. 2.9. Feng Zikai's deviation from his lyrical cartoons. From *China Weekly Review*, April 8, 1939. Courtesy of Feng Yiyin.

(Three hairs), started in 1935 in the daily *Xiaochenbao* (Small morning paper) in Shanghai. In its pre–World War II version, *Sanmao* was strictly for humor and entertainment (Bi and Huang 1983, 258). Social inequities started to appear when the strip was revived in 1945 after an eight-year lapse. Published in Shanghai's *Shenbao* newspaper, this new version satirizes greed among high officials while showing Sanmao as a brave-beyond-belief soldier (in one instance single-handedly defeating an entire platoon) who often was the butt of elder soldiers' anger—a kid at the bottom of the pecking order. Now called *Sanmao Congjunji* (Sanmao joins the army), these strips were brutally graphic at times, showing bayoneted victims, a severed hand, a splotch of blood where a fellow soldier had once stood, and the like. As Zhang (1983) himself acknowledged, Sanmao's ingenuous soldiering was often absurd. In one strip, Sanmao manages to lift his heavy gun and kill four enemy soldiers with one bullet.<sup>4</sup>

*Sanmao Congjunji* was a bridge from the “for fun” strips of the 1930s to the more serious and socially penetrating ones beginning in 1947. Mary Ann Farquhar (1995, 151) said that several traits common to the later

series *Sanmao Liulangji* (The wanderings of Sanmao), beginning in the newspaper *Dagongbao* in 1947, were evident in post–World War II *Sanmao* strips, such as their contemporary, controversial, and educational nature and their sympathetic concern for the masses. She said that a fourth characteristic added to *Sanmao Liulangji* was a “clear differentiation of class” (1995, 152), in which Sanmao is representative of the oppressed. Zhang Leping discussed the motivation of *Sanmao Liulangji*, writing,

[In 1948 and 1949], you could see homeless children in every street and alley you walked along in old Shanghai, then ruled by the reactionary nationalist government. Some were so exploited by landlords and capitalists that they had no clothes and food and died of illness and starvation. Others became cannon fodder, forced into the army by the reactionary Nationalist clique. Still others were killed indiscriminately by reactionary American devils. . . . Every family has countless such tragedies to tell! (quoted in Farquhar 1995, 149)

Throughout these pre-1949 strips, Sanmao was screamed at, kicked, scolded, slapped, and imprisoned, and although he was compassionate and well meaning by nature, he always seemed to do the wrong thing, and he never fit in. He is portrayed sleeping on the street blanketed by newspapers and dreaming of being part of a family with sufficient food, a bed, and a loving mother; shivering from cold as he watches a wealthy woman and her dog, both in fur coats, pass by; or thinking up survival schemes. In one episode, he hangs a sign around his neck advertising that he is for sale for ten thousand yuan. Meanwhile, in a shop nearby, a child's doll is advertised as costing one hundred thousand yuan.

Most *Sanmao* strips were reprinted many times as collections, particularly *Sanmao Liulangji*, which, after 1949, were used to contrast the alleged wretchedness of the pre-Liberation era with the uplifted living conditions under Mao. After 1949, the *Sanmao* series lost its spark, serving as an educational and rhetorical tool “to draw a symbolic line for children between old and new

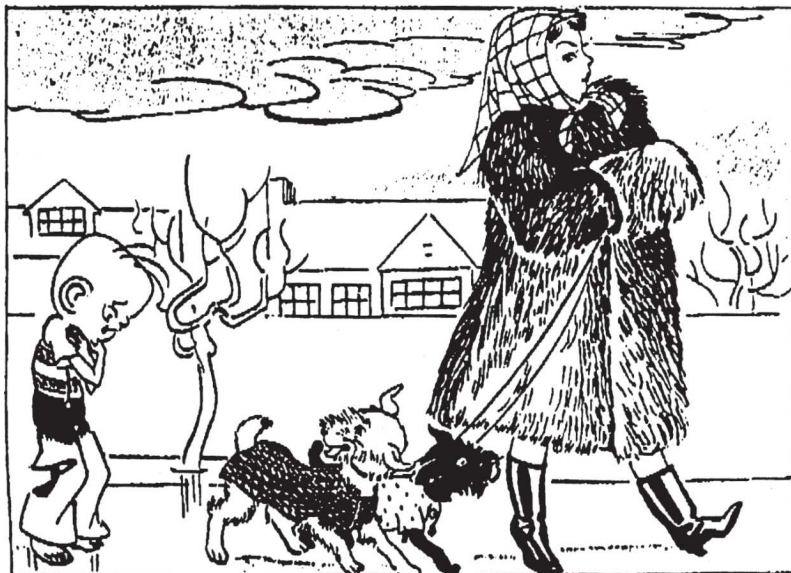


FIG. 2.10. "Dogs Are Better Off Than People." *Sanmao*. Zhang Leping, 1947.



FIG. 2.11. The wartime cartoon magazine *Kangzhan manhua*, no. 1, 1938. Cover by Ye Qianyu.

China" (Farquhar 1995, 154). Sanmao now was shown as a bright, studious boy and as a teacher, imploring friends not to smoke, be selfish, or show off (see Peng 1980, 2).

*Sanmao* remains China's most popular comic strip after nearly eight decades, still featured in films, stage shows, and new book compilations in China and abroad (often in pirated versions). Various merchandise carries Sanmao's name and image, including toys, clothing, shoes, and souvenirs. Although comic strips continue to appear in some magazines and newspapers today, none come anywhere near *Sanmao* in social impact and entertainment value.

Magazines that are exclusively dedicated to cartoons and humor and the strips they contained continued to be a vital part of China's publishing world until the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the initial stage of the war with Japan, cartoon magazines were used for propaganda and resistance purposes. The most notable example, *Kangzhan manhua* (Antiwar cartoon), along with *Xingqi manhua* (Weekly cartoon), were brought out under trying circumstances by a cartoon propaganda brigade that roamed parts of China warning about the Japanese invaders and building morale among the Chinese.

*Kangzhan manhua* was termed the "national authorized cartoon journal at the time" by brigade deputy leader Mai Fei (2006). Mai Fei was also in charge of the other brigade periodical, *Xingqi manhua*, a one-page,

weekly section of *Qianxian Ribao* (Front daily); the cartoon supplement was published fifty-two times.

Describing the conditions under which *Xingqi manhua* was produced, Mai Fei (2006) said: "When we did *Xingqi manhua*, there was no electricity some days, so we could not use the printing machine. We took photographs and when there were rainy days, we could not photograph either. So, we sometimes had to cut woodcuts. I know how to do them. Our writer Ye Gong wrote articles to fill empty spaces around woodcut cartoons. We printed in daytime and were never delayed; we worked day and night."

Between 1946 and 1949, a number of influential cartoonists who had fled China during the war returned and started new magazines to offset the Guomindang Party's restrictions on already existing newspapers. These magazines became the outlets for cartoonists to ridicule the civil war between the Guomindang and Communist Parties, dictatorship, persecutions by the Guomindang, inflation, and national traitors.

After 1949, cartoons and cartoon magazines were not as plentiful as previously; some of the problems cartoonists lampooned had been obliterated by the Communists. One cartoon magazine wrote: "The crazy dictator [Chiang Kai-shek] and his shameless greedy running dogs have offered us innumerable subjects for cartoon drawing," but they were no longer around (Shi 1989, 14). Under Mao Zedong, cartoons and cartoon magazines were tasked with invoking hatred for enemies of the





FIG. 2.12. Satire and Humor, January 6, 2006. Courtesy of Xu Pengfei.

state, refraining from ridiculing life in the new China, and singing the praise of the correct line.

From 1949 through the Cultural Revolution (1976), cartoon and humor magazines had an “unfortunate history,” according to Xu Pengfei (2001), former editor of *Satire and Humor*. Only one cartoon magazine, *Manhua*, published in Shanghai by the China Artists Association and edited by Mi Gu, lasted as long as ten years, closing in 1959 because of “so many political movements, the bad economic situation, low quality work, and poor paper” (Y. Jiang 2002).

The longest-running cartoon magazine in Chinese history is *Satire and Humor*, founded in 1979 by Hua Junwu, Jiang Fan, Ying Tao, Miao Di, and Jiang Yousheng as a supplement of the national newspaper, *Renmin Ribao* (People’s daily). Jiang Yousheng (2002) said that *Satire and Humor* was established because, “[d]uring the Cultural Revolution, no one could draw satire. After that, there were many cartoons on the ‘Gang of Four’ but no place to publish them.” In the beginning, *Satire and Humor* had a circulation of 1.3 million. Xu Pengfei (2001) said that in the early years, people queued to

make sure they received a copy. In 2001, the sixteen-page *Satire and Humor* printed 300,000 copies every two weeks (P. Xu 2001). By 2005, it was made into a weekly with a circulation of 110,000. Xu (2005) said that the magazine was more market oriented and sold mainly at newsstands; it was intended to be less artistically motivated and more concentrated on news and politics than other cartoon magazines that emphasized “humor and funny things.”

Whereas other newspapers and magazines pay cartoonists according to their rank in the profession, *Satire and Humor* compensates them by the quality of their work; thus, amateur cartoonists have been known to receive first-page billing. Xu (2001) said that cartoonists are asked to draw about specific topics—current topics, government policy, and especially the common people’s concerns. Every issue includes a page of comic strips, very popular with readers. Although an appendage of the government newspaper, *Satire and Humor* has “no limitations, as we can control everything ourselves,” Xu added.

Another important cartoon magazine published in Shanghai in the 1990s was *World of Cartoon*, a sixteen-page periodical started in 1985 by animator Ah Da. It folded in 1999. Originally, *World of Cartoon* was meant for cartoonists and cartoon lovers, but when it was revived as a page in the *Xinmin Evening News* in 2000, it aimed to appeal to all types of readers, according to its editor, Zheng Xinyao (2001).

In recent years, other cartoon magazines have appeared, mainly as commercial ventures (Wang 2001). Some, such as *Zhongguo manhua* and *Cartoon Monthly*, have replaced front-cover cartoons with photographs of entertainment personalities and local cartoons with manga.

The comics, whether in book, strip, or cartoon magazine format, have been following the path of so many aspects of Chinese culture—the old is rapidly giving way to the new, with not enough deliberation on preserving what is distinctly Chinese. With huge government interest in and support of comics and animation in the twenty-first century, quantity has tended to replace quality and commercialization often rules over artistic considerations.

## Notes

1. But, early on, lianhuanhua had its defenders. In about 1932, leading literary figure Lu Xun (Zhou Shuren) wrote an article, “‘Lianhuanhua’ bianhu” (In defense of “comic strips”), followed quickly by “Lianhuanhua xiaoshuo” (Comic strip novels) by major novelist, critic, and editor Mao Dun (Shen Yanbing). Both articles, published in *Wenxue yuebao*, saw merits in lianhuanhua and visual culture generally (see Macdonald 2011).
2. Two others were *Katong Wang* (King of cartoon) and *King of Popular Science Comics*.
3. Coco Wang draws memoir/diary-type comics (*tu wen*), popular among Chinese cartoonists in recent years. Two other Chinese cartoonists working out of England whose works are published in China are Yishan Li, author of about half a dozen comic books, and Rain (Ru An), known for *Ethereal Wings*, *Midnight Ink*, and *Silent Rainbow*.
4. Other pre–World War II and continuing strips were also published, for example Huang Yao’s *Mr. Willie Buffoon*.

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# 新聞

## 漫畫集





Small in geographical space and population, Hong Kong has yielded a comics culture disproportionately large and influential among its East and Southeast Asian neighbors. This has occurred in part because of the culture's versatility and willingness to break new ground. At varying times, Hong Kong comic books have incorporated traditional Chinese, Western, and Japanese styles; become popular enough to warrant daily editions; generated some of the world's bloodiest comics stories and drawings; generated new genres; and nurtured a lively alternative presence.

Cartooning is not new to Hong Kong. In 1867, the English-language *China Punch* was started by a British journalist mainly for foreigners residing in Hong Kong. A cartoon strip series appeared in the Hong Kong journal *Pictures of Current Events* beginning in 1898. Started by Xie Zuantai, the strip was syndicated by a number of Shanghai newspapers in 1903. By the 1930s, comic strips were almost a daily feature of all major newspapers (A. Lee 2001a, 14).

Comics magazines sprang up in the 1930s, including *Comics Weekly*, published by the *Kung Sheung Daily News* and regarded as the first "true comic magazine" in Hong Kong (A. Lee 2001a, 14). Other newspaper comics supplements were issued by *Wah Kiu Yat Po* and the *Sing Tao Daily*. In the last years of the 1930s, other comics magazines, usually joining the anti-Japanese war cause, sprouted, such as *Ting jin manhua* (Forward comics) by Zheng Jiazhen and *Zong dong yuan huabao* (All up in arms pictorial magazine) by Lu Shaofei, Zhang Yi, and Lin Jing. Comic strips such as *Pockmark Faced Third Aunt* by Si Tu-zhi, *Big Brother Li* by Chen Yi-qing, and *Old Ho* by Li Fan-fu were also popular at the time (A. Lee 2001a, 14).

For much of the following century, Hong Kong was used as a safe haven when China faced tumultuous situations; it became a home for refugee cartoonists from Shanghai and Guangzhou (some of whom were involved in revolutionary activities) and mainland cartoon magazines attempting to avoid suspension or prosecution. These periodicals and the artists who supported them dealt mainly with political and social commentary.

## Chapter 3

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# Hong Kong

## Post–World War II to the 1960s

Newspaper comic strips appeared in Hong Kong before World War II, as indicated above, but it wasn't until the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s that they began to thrive along with comic books, most likely because of an augmented market resulting from Hong Kong's baby boom. Collaboration with refugee cartoonists fleeing the civil war in mainland China also boosted Hong Kong comic art. For example, mainlanders Zhang Guangyu, Mi Gu, Ding Cong, Liao Bingxiong, and Li Binghong joined local comics writers Cheng Ka-chen and Lam Kam to found the Our World Art Club with the intention to revive Hong Kong comics. Liao and Zhang also started a comics magazine, *The Age of Comics*, in 1948. Yu Ming's comic book *Chau Yat-ching*, featuring a blundering character, appeared earlier in 1946.

Two names stand out among comics creators at that time: Louie Yu Tin (born Louie Che-tao) and Yuan Bou-wan. Louie (also Lui) produced strips for Hong Kong's *China Daily* immediately after the war, and for a few years while in Guangzhou he drew *Woo Lung Wong* (King of blunders). When the political situation in China changed in 1949, Louie returned to Hong Kong, bringing with him *Woo Lung Wong*, which appeared in *Chung Sing Po*, a newspaper he cofounded. A number of these and other strips that Louie created until the late 1960s employed social criticism, especially against communism, and were an "ironic mix of blunder-filled 'everyday' scenarios and humorous dialogue in colloquial Cantonese" (Hong Kong Heritage Museum 2012, 1). Also following the Guangzhou comics style with its text balloons of lower-class colloquial dialogue was Yuan Bou-wan, who composed funny, social criticism–laden newspaper strips such as *Kiddy Cheung*, started before and continued after the war; *Miss Lau*, about a maid and the men who pursued her; *Arrogant Chiu*, featuring a sergeant and his light-hearted escapades; and *Wong Chai*, a strip featuring a "spineless young man who cowered before his wealthy uncle" (W. S. Wong 2002a, 59). All of these strips appeared in the late 1940s; they often were published as collections, becoming the first comic



FIG. 3.1. *Chau Yat-ching* by Yu Ming, started in 1946, was one of Hong Kong's first comic books.

books in Hong Kong, and a few were adapted for the movies.<sup>1</sup>

The 1950s were both the best and the worst of times for popular culture in Hong Kong. After China closed its doors in 1949, cultural products no longer flowed freely between the mainland and the crown colony, one result of which was that Hong Kong turned to comics models from the United States. Cartoonists imitated American drawing and story styles; U.S. strips and comic books were translated and published in Hong Kong. Nevertheless, as Wendy Siuyi Wong (2002a, 17) pointed out, Hong Kong comics retained their own characteristics, such as the use of characters with exaggerated features, Chinese clothing and themes, and more panels per page than U.S. comic books.

At the decade's start, Hong Kong was an impoverished territory with resources in short supply and an infrastructure in disarray. Gradually, as the mainland





FIG. 3.2. *Children's Paradise*, which began in 1953, survived for more than forty years, during which time it featured many classic comics stories.

settled into communist rule, there was a growing influx of mainlanders and their financial resources; the overall situation evolved, in the process spawning a variety of publications, among them comics. Many of these strips and comic books addressed the everyday life and poverty of common people, at times tying these conditions to larger societal problems but almost never putting them in a political context. At the time, there was a cautious atmosphere in Hong Kong because of the turmoil the mainland was experiencing.

The expanding number of periodicals of the 1950s included *Manhua shijie* (Cartoon world) (1956), which carried short stories, songs, and photographs in addition to comic strips; others such as *Manhua* (1953) and *Joke Comics* (1958), which concentrated almost exclusively on comics; and children's magazines, most notably *Er tong le yuan* (Children's paradise) (1953). *Cartoon World*, started by Chan Gi-dol, Li Fan-fu, Cheng Ka-chen, Wong Sui, Li Ling-han, and Au Qing, lasted eight years, during which it nurtured a generation of cartoonists. *Cartoon World* and similar magazines were essentially "consolidation[s] of work by artists and writers from

the mainland and Hong Kong, [serving] as a cradle to nurture the talent that grew to dominate the business" (A. Lee 2001b, 14). In 1961, the same team responsible for *Cartoon World* launched *Manhua zhoubao* (Caricature weekly), itself so popular that it became a daily.<sup>2</sup> *Caricature Weekly* was unique in other ways, selling for a penny and using a tabloid format. Most comic books before then published in a trim size of three and three-fifths by five inches—the size of *lianhuanhua* (picture story books)—and later five by seven inches (W. S. Wong 2002a, 18; see also W. S. Wong 2002b, 35). From 1961 to 1965, many comics imitated *Caricature Weekly*.<sup>3</sup> *Children's Paradise*, created by Luo Guanxiao, was full of strips printed in full color and was popular with Chinese children in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia; it lasted until 1995, bringing out 1,006 issues.

The most striking phenomena associated with Hong Kong comics in the 1960s were the advent of comic books with a single, ongoing narrative; the impact of piracy; the arrival of television in 1967; and the accelerated move to action-packed comics, which fostered the kung fu genre and jump-started the career of Tony





FIG. 3.3. Hui Guan-man's *Choi Suk* (Uncle Choi), created in 1958, started out as a humorous character who, over nearly twenty years, transformed into other roles such as a war hero and a spy.

Wong (Wong Yuk-long). Other important developments concerning comics in the 1960s were the staging of the first comic strip exhibition in 1960, featuring works of Wong Chak, Hui Guan-man, Xiang Shan Ya Wang, and Wong Sze-ma, and the increasing prevalence of comic strips in major dailies such as *Sun Man Po*, *Sing Tao Daily*, and *Fai Po Daily* (A. Lee 2001b, 14).

Wendy Siuyi Wong (2002a, 18) identified *Lao fu tzi* (Old Master Q) by Wong Chak, *Dumb Detective* by Sung Sam-long, and *13-Dot Cartoon* by Lee Wai-chun as the best-selling ongoing comics, but *Uncle Choi*, started by Hui Guan-man in 1958, deserves to be added to the list. In fact, *Uncle Choi* was a forerunner<sup>4</sup> of the action comics of Hong Kong, the character himself at different times represented as a war hero, a spy, or whatever other guise met readers' changing demands.

The origin of Old Master Q, the most popular and longest-lasting (since 1964) comics character in Hong



FIG. 3.4. *Old Master Q* (1964), Hong Kong's most popular comic book, has a keen following in the Chinese diaspora throughout the world.

Kong, has been challenged. Some writers, for example Pang Chih-ming (1991, 16–17), strongly contended that the character was an extension of *Lao Fu Tzi*, a mainland strip started in 1941 by Peng Ti-feng in the *Tianjin Pictorial*. Wong Chak, who is credited with the Hong Kong version, said in a 1980 article (Wang 1991) that he first created a supporting character and, because he was criticized for leaning too much toward a Western style, then developed the very Chinese Old Master Q. He did admit to modeling his character after another mainland strip, *Mr. Wang*, by Ye Qianyu. As with any popular title, *Old Master Q* had many imitators (e.g., *Mr. Wang and Mr. Chu* [1968], *Mr. Chu and Aunt Eight* [1970], and *Grandpa and Granddaughter* [1971]). *New Dumb Detective* (1965) ran for more than two hundred issues and followed the same formula as other popular comics of the mid-1960s that carried the word “crazy” or “dumb” in their titles (e.g.,



**FIG. 3.5.** Lee Wai-chun in her Hong Kong apartment full of 13-Dot books, dolls, and other paraphernalia she created. She is standing next to an embroidery she did of her characters. March 22, 2012. Photo by Xu Ying.

*Crazy World, Dummy Seven and Beauty*); they all featured hapless characters.

Until the 1960s, women played virtually no role in comics.<sup>5</sup> Breaking the barrier was Lee Wai-chun and her *13-Dot Cartoon*<sup>6</sup> series (1966–1980), featuring an attractive young woman engaged in “unrealistic scenarios, luxurious life, charity work and fantastic adventures” (Wong and Cuklanz 2000, 38) and sporting a vast array of fashionable clothing. As Lee (2012) quipped, Miss 13-Dot would go into “the toilet with one dress on and come out in another”; issues one to twenty-eight contained 1,728 different pieces of clothing. She said that women readers took copies of *13-Dot Cartoon* to their tailors to have them copy the patterns. Miss 13-Dot was meant to push for feminine equality, Lee said, adding that the character “can do what she likes, make her own decisions, have her own ideas.” *13-Dot Cartoon* became popular very quickly, Lee added, partly because she “focused on the daily news. . . . The electric system was not developed well, with blackouts; there were shortages of power and water. People were very poor. So, there was a lot of bad news. . . . I put the bad news in a comical way. Because of dealing with these issues, readers felt close to Miss 13-Dot; they were their stories.”

*13-Dot Cartoon* lasted for 178 issues and is still being reprinted and exhibited.

In addition to these locally produced titles, pirated Japanese and Taiwanese comics were abundant

beginning in the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> They were popular because of their action stories, larger formats, increased numbers of pages, and affordability. The Hong Kong industry tried to fight off these foreign works by providing the same benefits as well as introducing a more exaggerated drawing style, sophisticated panel designs, and modern urban martial arts stories (W. S. Wong 2002b, 40).

The late 1960s and 1970s brought forth the genres of kung fu and sword fighting, which have since come to dominate Hong Kong comic books. Kung fu and fight comics were inspired by the then in-vogue Bruce Lee films, Japanese manga and anime, traditional lianhuanhua, and American action comics. Other appealing genres during this period were gangster, romance, anecdotal, adventure epics, horror, science fiction, and spy. Ng (2003, 184) identified comics involving science fiction and spy stories as among the most popular of the 1960s; these two genres often borrowed heavily from Japanese titles such as *Ultraman*, *Astroboy*, *The Wild Seven*, and others.

The subject matter of many of these comics fueled an ongoing controversy about bad taste and morality that lasted into the 1980s. Gory, sadistic, and pornographic themes prevailed, as graphically detailed in this description:

A triad boss, a brute of a man, tears off his victim's clothes and rapes her. Then, he kicks her in the head and sends her



hurtling across the room with his fist. She vomits copious amounts of blood. The ringleader informs his three henchmen they can now do with her as they please. After the gang rape, the girl, badly bruised and bloodied, has her hair set on fire, is punched again and finally collapses unconscious.

Three boys karate-chop another youngster. They then rub his face in a pile of human faeces and force him to eat it. When he hides in an empty coffin, they urinate into it.

Two rival gangs battle each other in a street fight. One combatant is stood on his head, legs wide apart, and given a karate blow to his groin; blood flows from the wound. Another has his face slashed into two; more spurting blood. Yet another gangster has his eyes jabbed; dark blood gushes out. A spearhead at the end of a chain rips through a leg; a fistful of sharp barbs is hurled into a torso. (*Asiaweek* 1981, 53)

In 1975, the Hong Kong government passed the Indecent Publications Law to curb the violence; it singled out magazines and comic books, but not newspapers. Some publishers found loopholes in the law, converting their comics into daily tabloids, renaming their titles, creating less realistic plots, and taking their characters out of Hong Kong housing projects and putting them in Japanese settings (W. S. Wong 2002a, 200). Surveys by the Consumer Council in 1979 and a youth organization in 1981 confirmed that the law was not very effective, that about half of the periodicals that youth bought were “detrimental,” and that a million comics touting sex and violence sold monthly to ten- to twenty-year-old males (*Asiaweek* 1981, 56).

### Mainstream Comics: The Golden Period to the Present

Tony Wong and the Kwong brothers (Tong-yuen and Nam-lun), who all started working in comics when they were thirteen years old or under, were primarily responsible for spurring what became the heyday of Hong Kong comic books. In fact, by the time Wong was twenty-one, he had already tried (and failed) four times



FIG. 3.6. Tony Wong in his luxurious office in Hong Kong. March 21, 2012. Photo by Xu Ying.

to start his own comics company, before he succeeded with the fifth, Yuk Long (Jademan), in 1971. As he explained: “At that time [late 1960s, early 1970s], one did not need much money to build a company. I would build them and then they would go down [fail]. Jademan was the fifth company I set up. The others failed because I did not know how to control money, and the market was changing in those times. In Hong Kong, in 1967, there were many demonstrations, lots of politics [political turmoil]. Many companies failed because of the politics” (T. Wong 2012).

On another occasion, Wong remembered, “I drew a comic and asked a publisher to print copies. I took them on a bicycle to newsstands. But they weren’t very popular” (*Asiaweek* 1988, 44).

Wong (2012) said that Jademan made it because it introduced the kung fu genre, but other catalysts were Wong’s refinement of the assembly-line production techniques and the storytelling formula common to Japanese manga (see Lent 1999, 109), and his knowing the value of establishing overseas markets, which he first did in Malaysia and Singapore in 1982 and 1983, followed





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**FIG. 3.7.** Tony Wong's (Wong Yuk-long) name is synonymous with Hong Kong comics. Besides creating and drawing memorable comics, he has also been a successful businessman, innovator of comics forms, and promoter of the industry, earning celebrity status as a result. On the left is *Golden Bo Daily* (1977), one of a few dailies devoted to comics that featured Wong's *Oriental Heroes*; on the right is *Yuk-long Manhua Biweekly* (1984), which always pictured Wong on its cover with a different famous person.

by most of East and Southeast Asia as well as Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and the United States.

Wong's initial success was *Siulauman* (Little rogues), drawn entirely by him in the early days, which was not uncommon. By the mid-1980s he was publishing fifteen titles, each ranging in circulation between 80,000 and 200,000 per issue, for a total monthly circulation of 2.1 million, which represented 70 to 90 percent of the Hong Kong comic book trade. In 1987, Jademan was doing well enough to be listed on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange and to begin diversifying into other ventures such as daily newspapers and youth magazines. After these maneuvers, comics made up less than 60 percent of the group's business. Some critics thought that Wong was getting in over his head as he moved into other media (Keating 1987, 17).

In 1989, however, the world turned upside down for Wong as he lost control of Jademan Holdings, and

while attempting to retake the company was convicted and sent to prison on charges of conspiracy to defraud and misappropriation of funds. The new owner was the newspaper publishing house Sing Tao, which purchased 39 percent of Jademan's shares and held Wong's 37 percent until a mortgage he owed was repaid (Liu 1992; for more details, see *Asiaweek* 1990, 61; *Far Eastern Economic Review* 1991, 65). Sing Tao was a more cautious owner than Wong. Feeling that the company could not "control" its artists and fearing that many would return to Wong's fold once he was released from prison, Sing Tao management decided to fill its books with manga, which would not require much local creative talent (Ki 1992).

When this author interviewed personnel at Jademan Holdings (then renamed Culturecom) in 1992, fourteen companies ranging from advertising to entertainment



**FIG. 3.8.** The author with Kwong Nam-lun in his Hong Kong comic book store. July 14, 1992.

made up the group's profile.<sup>8</sup> Two of the companies, Jademan and Citi-comics (started in 1992), brought out comics. Comic books still represented a large part of the holding company, as indicated by a comics workforce of 200 (130 of whom were artists), the production of eighteen to twenty comics titles (in addition to about twenty other magazines), and total per-issue sales of the weeklies and monthlies of 497,000 copies. Titles were retained if they sold at least 15,000 copies per issue; some 10 percent of the group's titles dipped below that mark every year and were subsequently dropped, according to production controller Liu Sui-yin (1992). Also, in 1992–1993, overseas expansion plans were in the works with DC Comics of the United States, Kodansha of Japan, and some European companies (Wan 1992).

Kwong Tong-yuen and his elder brother, Kwong Nam-lun, provided Tony Wong with competition throughout the 1970s. Tong-yuen created a handful of comic books in the late 1960s before launching his most successful, the kung fu title *Lee Siu-lung* (Bruce Lee), in 1972. His empire also included the penny comics papers *Hei Bo* and *Ching Bo* (W. S. Wong 2002a, 179). Nam-lun started *73-Manhua* in 1973 and two years later collaborated with Tong-yuen on *Hei Bo*. For a while in the 1980s, the brothers worked with Wong at Jade-man, before venturing out on their own again in 1986.

Together, or alone, they continued to dabble in various aspects of the business, and by the early 1990s they were publishing four weeklies and owned a comic book store. Nam-lun was best known for translating and printing forty pirated Japanese manga periodicals.

Considered Hong Kong's third-largest comics pirate at the time,<sup>9</sup> Nam-lun said that bringing out illegal Japanese books had been relatively easy: "I'd just buy a copy of a Japanese comic in a department store, pay someone to translate it, and print it. There would be at least five hundred buyers for each pirated title" (N.-L. Kwong 1992). He said that the piracy business suffered because local comics were more popular than those from Japan and because local comics publishers in the 1990s began to pay for rights to certain manga; once that was done, he could no longer pirate the titles. The Kwong name is still associated with comics through Kwong's Creations Company, the sole purpose of which is to publish the comics of Jackie Kwong, the son of retired publisher Kwong Tong-yuen (Wan 2012).

As Tony Wong's problems mounted in the late 1980s, some key artists left Jademan to start their own companies. Chief among them was Ma Wing-shing. After his departure in 1989, Ma created the action magazine *Cosmos* and formed the publishing venture Tin Ha (Jonesky). Some apparently did not appreciate Ma's striking out on his own. Over the years, Tin Ha



published the weekly *Black Panther*, the biweekly *Tin Ha*, monthly pure text novels based on these two titles, and later *God Machine* and the popular series *Wind and Cloud*. Ma had conceived of the idea of publishing traditional, text-only novels of *Black Panther* and *Tin Ha* with the view that readers wanted more details about these stories that comics could not offer, such as the feelings and emotions of the characters. Of course, readers already know the stories' endings from the comics versions (Siu 1992). Ma has been the key person at Tin Ha—the sole owner, sketcher of all covers, panels, and characters' faces, and originator of all scripts, according to art director Siu Kit (1992). Part of Ma's huge workload can be attributed to the comics industry's suffering from poor training schemes and the mobility of good artists. "Major artists go off and start their own businesses and we can't get good assistants, so someone like Ma has to do it all himself," his sister and Tin Ha's general manager, Ronnie Ma Shuk-chu (1992), explained. She added: "Those who look at comics as a short-term industry will grab as much money as they can and run, but Ma is a dedicated artist and he will remain." Tin Ha continues to produce, publishing only Ma's *Wind and Cloud* but still retaining 25 percent of Hong Kong's total comic book market (Wan 1992).

Another formidable publisher in the early 1990s was the Freeman Collective, started by Chris Ting-kin Lau and three other writer-artists who had left Wong's company in about 1988. At Jademan, Lau had been responsible for one of Hong Kong's only profitable gag comic books, *Jademan Comics*. Lau left Jademan because of disagreements with management and a 50 percent drop in circulation after the economic crisis of the late 1980s (Ki 1992). Trying to dispel the image that Hong Kong comics were trashy, Freeman artists innovated by mixing their standard drawings with methods borrowed from animation, and by extensively using airbrush and computer coloring (Clements 1996). The company ranked third behind Jademan and Tin Ha before eventually collapsing.

Besides Jademan, the Kwongs, Tin Ha, and the Freeman Collective, Hong Kong had three other comics

publishers in 1992: Long Sing Fung, Siukeung (Good friend), and Fourtain, each with two titles. The seven companies altogether published a total of forty-seven comic books, thirty-two of which were weekly or biweekly (Ki 1992). The comics were available for purchase at the few thousand newsstands that dotted Hong Kong, in comic book shops (which the owner of one such store said numbered about three hundred [Lo 1992]), and at night markets; these retail outlets accounted for 70 to 75 percent of all titles sold (Pang 1992). They could also be read for a fee at comics rental stores.

The comic book obviously had become a vital component of Hong Kong popular culture. Total comics sales in 1990, for example, were one and a half times the size of the pocket book market, two-thirds the size of the Cantonese record market, and one-sixth the size of the local film industry (Wong and Cheng 1990, 561).

In the early 1990s, personal combat (modern kung fu and ancient sword fighting) and science fiction were the most popular themes of Hong Kong comics, with 75 percent of all comic books coming from these genres. Of dwindling importance were ghost stories, which dropped from twelve titles in the late 1980s to two by 1992 (see Bosco 2007, 805, on comics about ghosts at Hong Kong universities). Gag and romance comics did not make a dent in the market, the former because of a lack of competent humor writers and the latter because the artists were for the most part too young and inexperienced romantically (Ki 1992). Other genres used by writers were "social" stories (gangster, criminal, gambling) and video game stories. "Social" comics faced an uphill struggle trying to compete with movie and television crime stories, and they were limited in explicitness by a public that would not accept the "too vulgar, too sexy, too violent" (Ki 1992). At times, politics made itself felt in commercial comic books such as *Drunken Fists*, *Laughing Sword*, and *Love Story*. At other times, social issues cropped up in different genres, one example being *Bum's Counsel*, a Freeman Collective book about a lawyer who defends undesirables, with factual sidebars about the Hong Kong justice system (Mosher 1991, 28). Usually, each comic book featured one serialized story,



some of which dragged on for a decade or longer; some new comics writers and artists preferred shorter stories that ended after five issues.

In the 1990s, comics publishers in general looked to other media such as movies, television, and video games for theme and character ideas. They created a genre, video game comics, selecting a character from a video game and popularizing that character; the most famous was *Street Fighter*. The proliferation of comic book publishers in the early 1990s resulted in more experimentation with styles and formats, and greater exploration of sociopolitical themes. Politics and social awareness themes made themselves felt after the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, and as Hong Kong prepared for 1997, when the British colony was returned to China.

Downsides to the splintering of the industry into smaller companies included a new emphasis on quick profits over a book's quality; a lack of teamwork, which reflected badly on the industry; and insufficient systemic control and discipline in production, a result of the immaturity of the heads of the new companies. As longtime Jademan general manager David Ki said, it was a "stormy situation" (1992).

After his release from prison in April 1993, Tony Wong wasted no time reentering the comics industry. After only five days of freedom, he launched Jade Dynasty Publications. And, as Sing Tao officials had worried, he raided about thirty staff members from Culturecom (the successor to Jademan). Within a couple of months, Jade Dynasty had released two new titles, *Superhero in the Century* and *Legend of an Emperor*, which enjoyed strong sales. Wong boasted that he planned to turn Jade Dynasty into an "oriental type of Walt Disney," move into movie production and merchandising, capture 50 percent of Hong Kong's comic book industry, and eventually develop a theme park (K. Wong 1993).

Apparently, his competitors took him at his word. Only weeks after his rebound, rival publishers threatened to turn the comic book industry upside down, planning to launch eighteen new titles by the end of 1993. Culturecom offered a million-dollar salary for a chief artist, while the Kwong firm started a Hong

Kong edition of its popular action series in China, *Ten Tigers of Guangdong*, as well as three new titles. Tin Ha responded by planning four special issues of its science fiction comics (G. Chan 1993, 4).

The next three years (1994–1996) were the most financially prosperous that Hong Kong comics publishers had yet experienced, although much of the success could be attributed to a transition to Japanese manga. Longtime comics artist and administrator Alan Wan, who switched from drawing local comics to marketing and licensing manga at about that time, explained that although what he was doing changed the market, "[i]t didn't mean Japanese comics were taking away readers from Hong Kong comics. Instead, it enlarged the market. With manga, more people were reading comics. Moneywise, from 1994 to 1996 was the top [time period] of the [Hong Kong] comics industry. It was the best period of business; no matter if you were importing Japanese manga or publishing local comics, you could make money easily" (quoted in Cha 2007).

But the bubble burst in 1997, all but ending the golden age of comics. The blame was put on the economic crisis that hit most of Asia, political instability as Hong Kong's governance reverted to Beijing, and the changeover to the Internet as an increasingly predominant entertainment vehicle. As the Internet, video games, karaoke, and mobile phones became popular, a transition occurred from "reading as the primary source of entertainment to an interactive trend" (Alan Wan, quoted in Cha 2007). Comic book readership suffered as a result of the availability of these "new" media, and the diversion in their direction of the limited spending money at the disposal of teenagers.

To cope, a restructuring of the industry and reinvention of comics were in order. During the ensuing decade, some companies of the early 1990s folded; others and the new firms that joined them directed considerable attention to the production of online comics, games, and animation, the printing and distribution of manga, and the exportation of popular titles throughout the region.

Jade Dynasty led the way in redirecting comics production and distribution in the 1990s and 2000s,

primarily because the firm's general manager, Alan Wan, with Tony Wong's blessing, established an international development department designed to license and market imports and exports in Asia and Europe. With the wide-ranging network he had set up, Wan also helped his boss move into animation, outsourcing much of the work to mainland China. Wan, who left Jade Dynasty in 2010 to devote time to his animation company, Anitime, still insists that "Hong Kong comics people have to change their mindsets—not to be writers, but they need to create forms, perhaps like making motion comics. The comics producers must broaden their thinking. Now [in 2012], even fewer people read newspapers. . . . They and the creators need to use their creativity not just on comics per se, but on other media [adaptations]" (Wan 2012).

With the shrinking market for comic books in Hong Kong, both government and industry personnel saw exportation as a solution. In 2002, the Hong Kong Trade Development Council, while announcing that comics were one of the city's thirteen major creative industries, urged the comics industry to work harder to export and license their titles (Foo 2011, 275). Of course, Hong Kong comics were being exported long before the council's suggestion.

Today, comics production in Hong Kong, to a rather large degree, is built around the foreign market. The exportation process usually involves two types of comics formats and delivery dates—weeklies as they appear in Hong Kong (usually in editions of thirty-three to thirty-five pages plus advertisements) distributed by air mail to Taiwan<sup>10</sup> and Singapore within twenty-four hours after publication, and compilations in book form of two to four issues of a weekly comic book of the same title, published six to eleven weeks after the individual weeklies and priced accordingly. The majority of Hong Kong mainstream comics use this format.<sup>11</sup> Distribution to Malaysia is different, because the market for Hong Kong comics is substantial enough there to warrant the issuance of licenses to Malaysian comics publishers to reprint locally (Foo 2011, 280, 282, 289).

The audience that mainstream comics publishers are most attentive to is that of mainland China. However,

a Beijing-issued quota that allows the entry of only ten foreign comic book titles for the entire country has put a damper on the expansion of Hong Kong comics there. Tony Wong (2012), whose Jade Dynasty holds two of those ten slots, said that the cost of producing comics for the China market was very high, "and there are other expenses too. Of course, there are no quotas for pirates. Also, we have to buy a license from the China government, which is also a lot of money." By the 2010s, the China situation had changed, according to Wong, with less piracy and diminished production costs; however, by then, Wong had set his sights on another way to get deeper into that market. Jade Dynasty, in 2012, put its comic books on the Internet specifically to attract mainland Chinese. Wong spelled out the details of the company's plan:

In a month [April 2012], we will put our comics on the Internet. Customers can pay HK\$10 a month and get all types of our comics. Or, they can pay twenty cents per title. If we get one million readers, that will be HK\$10 million. I believe we will get this. We will still print paper versions for Hong Kong and overseas. All million Internet readers will be in China. But, some readers will want to get and keep the printed issues which will then increase [in circulation]. We will be able to sell more than one hundred thousand printed copies. (2012)

In 2012, according to Wong, Jade Dynasty published four weekly series, translated by foreign comics companies into fourteen languages. Jade Dynasty's executive director, Dick Kwong (2012), said that every Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday a new Jade Dynasty comic book appears. He added that, for unknown reasons, readers do not like to purchase comics on Mondays and Tuesdays.

Wong seemingly remains steadfast in his conviction that comics production in Hong Kong is strong. As chairman of the Hong Kong Comics and Animation Federation, he told the Legislative Council of Hong Kong on September 7, 2009, that the Hong Kong comic book industry's annual gross output value was on a par per capita with U.S. and Japanese comics (Foo 2011, 75).



FIG. 3.9. The cover of an early DARK comic book, drawn by James Khoo (Khoo Fuk-lung), who also owns DARK, which started in 2012.

Others have doubts about the strength of the industry. One such detractor is Alan Wan, who said that the number of titles (fewer than twenty) and total circulation are about half of what they were in the 1980s–1990s. The average weekly circulation per local title is less than twenty thousand; manga titles sell an average of three thousand copies per volume in Hong Kong (Wan 2012). In his rundown of the eleven listed Hong Kong comics producers, Wan pointed out that Jade Dynasty and Jonesky controlled 65 percent of the market, while others such as Rightman Publishing, Tong Li, and Culturecom published licensed Japanese manga. Culturecom also carries its old titles. Rightman does issue a popular children's magazine, *Coco*, that carries many Hong Kong comics. Firedog Studio, basically a game development company, treats comic books as a “hobby,” bringing out a title in manga style from “time to time.” Previously Hong Kong's third largest comics publisher (in the early 2000s), Ocean Creative is “very quiet now as their market share is

shrinking” (Wan 2012). Lucky Dragon Comics and Animation, owned by Tony Wong and James Khoo (Khoo Fuk-lung), folded in late 2011. The company had published Khoo's *Amazing Weapons 4*, a martial arts weekly described as a “rehashing of old formulas” (K.-W. Lau 2008). However, Khoo felt that he could not risk trying something new, a dilemma many local comic artists have faced in recent years. As Lau Kit-wai (2008) wrote, “the familiar old tales no longer appeal as reflected by a dwindling number of readers, but exploring new subjects or launching a new series involves risks that may jeopardize careers.”

New to the scene are The One Comics Publishing, which publishes one or two titles by Andy Lito, and DARK<sup>12</sup> Comics Publishing, exclusively owned by James Khoo, who set up the firm after the dissolution of Lucky Dragon. Khoo is a veteran artist and publisher, having drawn for Jademan beginning in 1980. He started the Rising Dragon Company in the early 1990s, where he published his *Dragon Man*; after that, he rejoined Tony



Wong at Jade Dynasty and eventually partnered with him at Lucky Dragon. DARK Comics opened in January 2012, publishing only a new version of Khoo's *Tei jiang xiong heng* (Iron warrior), which he first drew in 1989. Khoo claimed a circulation of ten thousand for *Iron Warrior*, predominantly a kung fu book with touches of love and romance (Khoo 2012). His plans called for selling the title's copyright to firms in Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore, transposing *Iron Warrior* into animation, games, and toys, and creating new titles for children (Khoo 2012).

Also somewhat recent is Century Culture Limited, started in 2004 by the husband-wife team of Ma Long<sup>13</sup> (Ma Shing-yuen) and Fong She-mei. Century Culture publishes children's educational comic books (usually featuring a black cat and a white cat) in eleven different series; in any given month, the company issues four or five comics. After some rough financial times, Century Culture's sales grew in the 2010s, partly because of tie-ins with a mainland publisher. Fong (2012) said that "quite a few" other companies bring out children's comic books, adding, "[t]hey followed us, copied our way, but are not successful."

Many reasons have been ventured for the decline in Hong Kong comics production and readership, including the aforementioned fear of risk taking, the sameness of content and styles, competing media for audience attention, lack of recognition (and poor pay) for comics creators, a focus on merchandising after 2000 at the expense of quality comics, and a dearth of celebrity artists as publishers send postproduction work to China (K.-W. Lau 2008).

Connie Lam (2012), executive director of the Hong Kong Arts Centre, said that a major problem is that mainstream companies do not invest in promoting new artists because of the costs involved. Alternative comics artist Kongkee (2012) agreed. He elaborated on what has become a Catch-22 scenario:

The mainstream had become an art form of traditional craftsmanship, like Peking opera. The audience is aging and the mainstream cannot attract a new audience. Content is

more boring, and it is too difficult to change the style, and if the publishers did, they would lose the audience they already had. So, they can't attract a new audience. Also, in manga, there are many stories in a book; if you don't like one story, you can look at others. But, traditional Hong Kong comics have only one story. (2012)

### Alternative Comics: The 1990s to the Present

Hong Kong alternative comics, in the sense that they are often experimental, independent of big publishers, oriented toward local sentiments, and personal and light-hearted in story and style,<sup>14</sup> came onto the scene with some force in the 1990s, although Li Chi-tak and Chan Ya had drawn in that style in the late 1980s. Li, whose fame came from his comic *Spirit*, has been described as an "important local artist not only for his unique drawing style but also for his success in introducing alternative comics to overseas audiences" (T.-C. Wong 2011, 10–11). Chan Ya, Hong Kong's second prominent female cartoonist, began her career drawing for the leftist *Sing Wan Pao* (New evening news) in 1989 and the women's magazine *Sisters*. Because she drew "something different" (and critical), she faced problems with her paper's management as well as with feminist groups. Chan Ya's strips were collected in her anthology, *One Woman Can Make Three Markets* (Y. Chan 1991). In this, her only comic book, Chan Ya included more than 160 strips of her "unappealing character with thick lips and a loud voice" (Wong and Cuklanz 2001, 75), who sarcastically commented on Hong Kong politics. The strip was cancelled by *Sing Wan Pao*.

Over the next twenty years, alternative comics found their place alongside the mainstream, as young artists, a few of them art school graduates, tried their hand at doing comic books, either collecting strips they had published in newspapers and magazines or self-publishing their comics, sometimes in very rudimentary fashion.

Collecting newspaper and magazine strips into book form has been the norm for most alternative comics

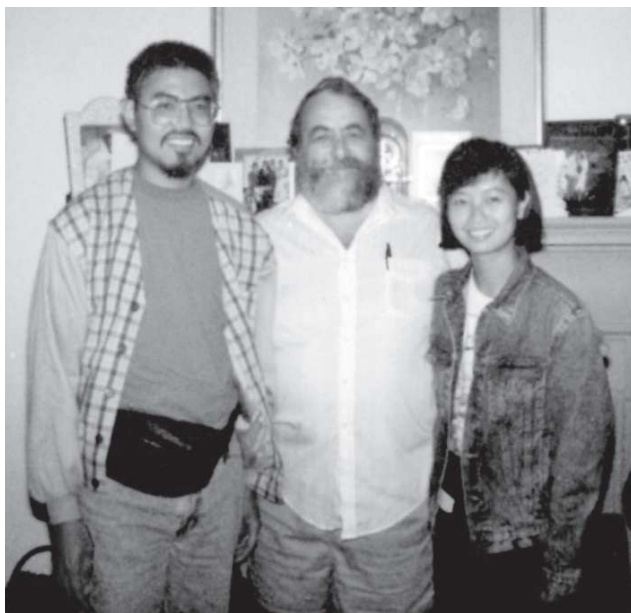


FIG. 3.10. Chan Ya (right), Hong Kong's second recognized female comics creator, pictured with the author and her husband, Wong Kee-kwan (Zunzi) (left), the territory's most prominent political cartoonist. Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania.

artists. Long-time artist Lai Tat Tat Wing (2012) had a strip in the magazine supplement *Yellow Bus*,<sup>15</sup> and Craig Au Yeung did *Love Kills*, a strip that used relationship dynamics to lampoon human frailties and to challenge Asian prejudice against homosexuals. Published in the *Oriental Daily News*, Hong Kong's largest Chinese-language daily, *Love Kills* was stopped when the editors thought that it had become too controversial (Cheng 1999, 54–55). In more recent years, Au Yeung has written a strip called *18-Minutes Plus*, recipes told as stories. Published in *Milk* magazine, the strip features recipes that Au Yeung concocts in about eighteen minutes (Au Yeung 2012). Lily Lau (2012) has drawn strips specifically for newspapers in Hong Kong (*Beginning of the End*), Macao, and Taiwan (*St. John's Warts*); and Chihoi and Kongkee's *Hijacking* was a *Ming Pao* strip for a year. Also, Chihoi's four Fa Fa books, the story of a father and his daughter, first appeared in the *Sun* newspaper (Chihoi 2012). Kong-kee (Kong Khong-chang) started doing strips in 2003, which he circulated only to friends by the Internet. Later, he did *Pandaman*, appearing in *Ming Pao* about the time of the 2007 antigovernment demonstrations, and *Penguin* (December 2011 in the daily paper *AM* 730), a comedy strip based on his childhood feelings as an immigrant.

*Ming Pao* and *East Touch* magazine have been very accommodating to strip artists. Besides those artists mentioned above whose works have appeared regularly in *Ming Pao*, the journal prints the work of political cartoonists Zunzi (Wong Kee-kwan) and Ma Long (Ma Shing-yuen), as well as Stella So (So Man-yee), whose weekly strip *Old Girl Base*, a diary of her personal life and family interactions, also appeared in two popular book editions. Earlier, So drew a two-page weekly strip for *Milk* magazine, which also was compiled into a book (So 2012). *East Touch*, described as a “fashion, trend weekly catalogue” in which comics are used as “dessert for the shoppers who read it” (Yeung 2012), has devoted its back page particularly to strips by Yeung Hok-tak (e.g., *Biutung Wa Jap*) and Siuhak (*Black Hole* and *Fake Forensic Science*). Because *East Touch* tends to be pro-government, cartoonists must exercise caution (see Faun 2011, 97–101).

Having one's newspaper strip published is an achievement in Hong Kong because of the dwindling number of dailies and the limited space for cartoons in those that remain. Most cartoonists relish having a strip because of the recognition afforded their work, the built-in audience created for spin-off comic books, and the steady income provided.

Another way to get one's alternative comic book published is to do it oneself, either individually or as part of a group. As previously stated, Kongkee initiated his career by drawing Internet cartoons for his friends' amusement. Chihoi, while a university student, drew comics that he photocopied and handed out to students outside the canteen (Chihoi 2012).

Beginning in 1997, two small, informal groups of alternative comics creators successively convened (and published) with the aim to encourage, exhibit, and publish members' comics. Craig Au Yeung played the major role in pulling together both the Cockroach and Springrollllll groups; the former also launched a publication with the same name. Cockroach (also called Indie Comic Artists) was an end result of a 1997 joint exhibition of the comics of Au Yeung and Li-Tak. As Au Yeung (2012) explained:



**FIG. 3.11.** Craig Au Yeung has played a major role in establishing a community and forums for alternative comics artists. Hong Kong, March 24, 2012. Photo by Xu Ying.

We got some money from a cinema house. This place had a corridor which we used as an exhibition passage. We had some sponsorship money left over and thought why not use it to do a publication. We thought it boring to just have a catalogue of our exhibition. We started *Cockroach*; the first album in two thousand to three thousand copies. It was well received. . . . I had no forward intention to keep *Cockroach* going, but, gradually, realized, from what the cartoonists said, it was time for me to be in a position to organize a platform for the younger generation of cartoonists.

*Cockroach*, which produced four oversized editions from 1997 to 2000, launched the publishing careers of Chihoi, Yeung Hok-tak, Lily Lau, and Seeman Ho, and sparkplugged the coalescence and maturation of the alternative comics community. The mission to encourage alternative cartoonists was mentioned by Chihoi, who said that the *Cockroach* organization gave him an opportunity to meet other cartoonists, which, in turn, made him more confident. The group and its publication lived a hand-to-mouth existence, always seeking funding to continue its operations, Chihoi (2012) said; it folded in 2000 because the artists felt that it was time to concentrate on their individual works, according to Au Yeung (2012).

*Springrollllll* was a “type of reunion action” that arose on the heels of *Cockroach* (Au Yeung 2012). The idea came from a famous Taiwanese comics creator, Ao Yu-hsiang, who suggested printing comics in collections

(*Springrollllll* in Hong Kong and *Taipei Café* in Taiwan), one purpose of which was to showcase local works at international festivals (Au Yeung 2012; Yeung 2012). *Springrollllll*’s creators exhibited their publication, of which only a single issue was produced, at festivals in Switzerland and Taiwan. The group’s five members (hence the five *l*’s in its name), were Au Yeung, Yeung Hok-tak, Siuhak, Chihoi, and Eric So.

Another organization created to publish its members’ works is the 29 Group, made up of poets, novelists, photographers, cartoonists, and others who, according to the group’s original mandate, could not be older than twenty-nine. Kongkee’s first comic album, *Imperfect Shoes*, was a 29 Group product.

Although alternative comics have not had the financial success or fan base of pre-1990s’ mainstream titles, they have helped keep alive the vital role Hong Kong has played in Asian cartooning. Since the dawn of this century (more specifically, post-2005), Hong Kong alternative comics have established an international presence, being featured at the Angoulême and other festivals; drawn the attention of and some support from the city government; organized a professional infrastructure; found a steady and reliable publisher (Joint Publishing); and built an enlarged readership.

The government’s general distaste for mainstream comics in the late 1990s precipitated changes within the industry that benefited both mainstream and alternative creators. With justifiable concern that the authorities were instituting legislation to control comics on



the grounds that they were harmful to children, Tony Wong organized the Hong Kong Comics and Animation Federation (HKCAF) in 1999. His purpose was to lobby councillors in support of the usefulness of comic books (Wan 2012). Wong and others, such as former Jade Dynasty sales representative C. P. Leung and executives of the publisher Tung Tak Enterprise, envisioned a festival as a means of bringing favorable attention to comics. In 1999, the first Hong Kong Comics Festival was held, featuring comics and their spin-off products. Yiu Wai-hung (2011, 71) described the festival as a multimedia popular culture show with comics at its center, the purpose of which was to inspire creativity through comics. Later, animation was added, along with affiliated attractions such as cosplay, model competitions, toy and game exhibitions, Internet showcases, and more. Every year, for five days in July or August, the comic-con attracts five hundred thousand to six hundred thousand attendees (Wan 2012).

From about 2007, the Hong Kong government changed its attitude toward comics “one hundred and eighty degrees,” learning (probably from mainland China and South Korea) the necessity of nurturing a creative industry, mainly for financial benefit. Alan Wan (2012) felt that the “main rhythm” for this new emphasis came from Beijing. The support has come through the funding of foreign exhibitions of Hong Kong comics, the proposed West Kowloon Culture District (a HK\$26 billion project that will include a museum dedicated to animation and comics, exhibition and activity spaces, studios, etc.), and some projects of the Hong Kong Arts Centre (HKAC). Occasionally, alternative cartoonists such as Craig Au Yeung and Lily Lau have received funding from the Hong Kong Arts Development Council.

The HKAC, established in 1977 by private donations, has been responsible for setting up significant parts of the professional infrastructure for alternative (and mainstream) comics, except for the building site, which was provided by the government. Under the supervision (since 2004) of Executive Director Connie Lam, the HKAC has organized exhibitions of Hong Kong comics locally and internationally, sponsored comics awareness

activities, and assisted in publishing works of independent cartoonists such as Lai Tat Tat Wing’s *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* and Ahko’s *Tonight I Kill My Dog* (T.-C. Wong 2011, 11). Eight HKAC exhibitions were part of the center’s Comix Home Base Project of 2006 and 2007, the first of which was Comix Magneto, showcasing collaboration among twenty Hong Kong cartoonists. To interculturally link Hong Kong independent cartoonists and their works with the outside world, the project mounted local exhibitions of comics from Japan, Korea, and Taiwan and exhibited Hong Kong comics in France, Britain, Russia, Singapore, and mainland China. The Comix Home Base Project, which lasted twenty months, also organized a series of public workshops, seminars, and screenings.

Lam (2012) is particularly proud of what she called the HKAC’s “box project”: six large boxes, each representing a decade of Hong Kong comics history, which, when opened, reveal publications, videos, and animation pertaining to that period; the boxes themselves serve as the display cases. By organizing exhibitions, Lam (2011b, 7) and the HKAC hope “not only to pay homage to comics masters and masterpieces but also to look back on the struggles of the industry. While reflecting on the past, we hope to be more informed and prepared for the future development of comics in the era of multimedia, for example on new platforms like iPhone and iPad” (2011b, 7).

The HKAC also has helped in recording the history of Hong Kong comic books. In 2006, it copublished with Joint Publishing *The Road Has Been Long: 25 Years of Independent Comics in Hong Kong*, a volume containing profiles of twenty-seven independent comic artists; and in 2009, *Kaleidoscope: History of Hong Kong Comics Exhibition*, a compilation of interviews with, and articles by, key people in the medium’s development. The book resulted from an exhibition of the same name supported by the Home Affairs Bureau. Revised editions of *Kaleidoscope* were printed in 2010 in celebration of the World Expo in Shanghai, and in 2011 for the Angoulême International Comics Festival in France.

In 2013, the HKAC was scheduled to acquire a four-story building in Wan Chai, the district known for much

comics history, which will be converted into a comics facility, housing archives, lecture halls, workshops, a comics store, artists' residence space, and art education components (Lam 2012).

The dilemma that independent comic artists have long experienced—namely, finding a publisher—was partially resolved in 2006 when Joint Publishing, which had traditionally concentrated on independent music, film, and fashion, turned some of its attention to comics. Director Anne Lee said that Joint's bias against comics was dispelled after staff members made an eye-opening visit to the Japanese publisher Shogakukan, which devoted half of its production to manga. Observing this company's financial viability and touched by Hong Kong comic artists' hardships, Lee launched the Local Comics Series, the first title of which was Craig Au Yeung's compilation, *The Road Has Been Long: 25 Years of Independent Comics in Hong Kong*. From the independent cartoonists profiled in that volume, Joint chose to publish works by Yeung Hok-tak and Siuhak; a number of others followed, including cartoonists chosen from among a yearly talent competition the company sponsored (So 2012). Joint, which has its own bookstores, nurtured a new type of audience—more affluent and educated than typical mainstream readers—and ensured a more reliable outlet for comic artists. As Chihoi (2012) said: "Before Joint, independents were published only once in a while, and after a month, their books disappeared from bookshelves. That is not the case with Joint."

The themes and storytelling skills of alternative comics creators have much to do with the growing readerships they enjoy. Because they work outside the confines of comics "factories," the artists are free to experiment with presentation forms and to delve into topics off limits to other mass media and identifiable by both intellectuals and the masses.

Probably the most willing to trying out new ways of telling comics is Lai Tat Tat Wing, who began to experiment in 1985 and 1986. His first book, *Picking a Pig's Tail* (1995), is an attempt to tell a story, free of dialogue, simply by varying frame sizes. Lai (2012) said of his freestyle comics: "There are no answers or ideas at the

end of the stories; characters have no fixed style, status, or even name."

Influenced by Lai's *Picking a Pig's Tail*, Chihoi has also done out-of-the-norm comic books. *Hijacking*, a joint venture with Kongkee, portrays twelve Hong Kong literary figures, each depicted visually in a style evoking that author's way of writing, and each given two artistic versions—one by Chihoi, the other by Kongkee. When Chihoi drew writer Xi Xi's *The Cat Has Come*, a book about her cancer, he used his left hand, as she had been forced to do because of the disease. Chihoi (2012) said that he varied his style to show children that literature can be "exciting." Chihoi also experimented with the novel *The Train* by the Taiwanese poet Hung Hung. Chihoi follows his comics treatment of Hung's text with the corresponding excerpts from the text. In her books, Lily Lau (2004) has had a tendency to tear apart human bodies and then reassemble them, a technique that she called a type of therapy.

The techniques employed by alternative comics artists run the gamut from watercolor (Siuhak) to collage and montage (Chihoi), fold-out (Stella So), clear line with much black (Lily Lau), and subdued details (Yueng Hok-tak). The most common themes are nostalgia for the old Hong Kong, lamentation for the disappearing city, and identity with the plight of the people, all done with personal touches.

In recent years, Hong Kong residents have witnessed the transformation of their city at the hands of large corporations in consort with politicians. In the process, many landmarks and other elements that lent the city its charm have been destroyed. The "disappearing city" is the cause célèbre of some alternative cartoonists, foremost of whom is Stella So. Much of So's comics work has involved nostalgic images of Hong Kong, of "the people and the street I knew earlier" (So 2012). She researches and photographs older parts of the city earmarked for urban "development" and, with great detail, incorporates these images into her comic books, murals, and the like. So also has gained an audience for her diary comics, marked by their female sensitivity. Her goal is to let the public know what the corporations and

government are doing and “wake up the people to parts of life soon to be lost” (So 2012). Others notably concerned about the disappearing city are Siuhak and Yueng Hok-tak, both of whom feel that the “colonial times were the ‘best times of our lives’” (Yeung 2012). Yeung explained: “Now, there is catastrophic destruction of the cities of old. We are still a minority in voicing opposition to these trends.”

By taking this stand against the ravages of corporatism, these artists aim to touch the lives of the displaced and dispossessed people of Hong Kong, a mission shared by others such as Ahko, who has dealt with the theme of blue-collar workers, and Lily Lau, who has exposed gender inequality and hypocrisy. Lau (2012) said that her five comic books are meant to touch upon people’s “deepest fears, loneliness, desire for love.” At an earlier time, Lau (2004) admitted to being pessimistic, although she said that she tries to instill her books with positive thoughts. Her first book, *Mom’s Drawer Is at the Bottom*, dealt with sex, gender, and overworked mothers. Lau, like Mazai, Stella So, and Lai Tat Tat Wing, has often presented her stories in diary form.

### Unresolved Problems and Future Paths for Hong Kong Comics

The most gnawing problems facing both mainstream and alternative comics creators in Hong Kong are the dwindling number of readers, many lost to digital media; the limited working and living space available to cartoonists in a very crowded city of seven million people; and the inadequate preparation of a new generation of comic artists.

Work and living spaces are at a premium in vertical-living Hong Kong. Lily Lau (2012), describing her place, made the analogy that it was “smaller than [an American’s] game room or garage.” Kongkee (2012), who shares a studio with Chihoi, pointed to rent and overhead costs as normally burdensome; however, he and Chihoi are fortunate to have a rent-free workshop. The fourteen-story building where they work is owned by a

supporter of the arts, who not only gives various artists free rent but also provides space on the first floor for a coffee/tea lounge complete with a bookshop where artists’ books can be purchased, their artworks exhibited, and activities held.

Several comics creators wondered if there would be a generation of cartoonists to succeed them. Lai Tat Tat Wing (2012) recalled that in the 1980s and 1990s, mainstream publishers encouraged young talent, offering readers payment for drawings they submitted and grooming recruits to move into key drawing and writing slots once they were hired. He lamented that these opportunities no longer exist for mainstream or alternative comics. Chihoi (2012) said that it has become increasingly difficult for young artists to break into the field because of fewer bookshops to market their works and less newspaper space for their cartoon columns.

Problems more germane to mainstream than independent comics are copyright violations through piracy, and high production costs. Although the rampant piracy that plagued Hong Kong for decades has abated, it still exists to a significant degree and is damaging to a comics market already being plundered by new electronic media. The latter have also become a component in copyright violation, as Lee Chi-ching (2012) pointed out: “You publish a comic in the morning; in the afternoon, it will be in a pirated electronic version.”

Mainstream comics publishers have had to downsize operations since the 1990s because of higher production costs relative to lower sales. To give an example of production costs, Lee Chi-ching (2012) said that publishing a thirty-page comic book requires ten to twenty workers, whose wages range from HK\$7,000 (US\$930) to HK\$20,000 (US\$2,660) a month. Additionally, other costs have escalated, especially studio space. Mainstream comics firms survive by maintaining other businesses such as animation, games and toys, and rentals. Concerning the latter, Lee (2012) said: “Some comics companies survive by buying land and renting it. They buy a large building, use one-half of it as a studio and rent out the rest. They lose on their publications, but make money as landlords.”



Hardly any comics creators, especially those working on alternative titles, make a living in their profession; they must maintain other jobs or depend on family businesses or largesse. Cartoonists who have regular newspaper and magazine strips are a bit better off, because they can expect a steady, although small, check. Chihoi (2012) said that most of his income comes from his *Fa Fa* newspaper strip. Some jobs held by alternative cartoonists are musician in a pop band (Ahko), song lyricist and commercial illustrator for pop singers (Siuhak), travel and food writer for newspapers (Craig Au Yeung), visual artist for an experimental theater (Lai Tat Tat Wing), animator (Kongkee, Yeung Hok-tak, and others), illustrator, graphic designer, and advertising employee. Lily Lau (2012) said that one-third of her income comes from creating comics, the rest from a recycling business she owns with her mother and “renting out flats and taxis.”

Other problems alternative artists mentioned were lack of time to do quality research and drawing (applicable also to the factory-style production techniques of mainstream comic books), a dearth of university courses devoted to comic art, the strong competition in the alternative comics community, and government, media management, and societal restrictions on content.

Limitations on the freedom to express affect both mainstream and alternative comics. Government restrictions have been relatively light, although cartoonists such as Yeung Hok-tak (2012) fear the possible passage of Code 23, which would ban dissent against, and criticism of, the government. Perhaps more menacing are censorship powers assumed by media managers and editors. Instances of pulling comic strips from *East Touch* have been noted, and self-censorship is the norm at daily newspapers. Hong Kong’s most famous political cartoonist, Zunzi, said that he has no problems with editorial censorship because he has “worked so long, I know the borderline; I’m self disciplined” (2012), although the situation is different for newcomer cartoonists. Zunzi said that because the media are owned by big businesses, they have a built-in cautionary inclination. Lily Lau (2012), some of whose comics have a touch of eroticism, said that what is acceptable is “[b]ound by UK

colonialism, Christianity, and Confucianism. It becomes a weird, monster combination. The cartoonist must survive between the gap of the West and China. If you are very high profile, you are criticized. Hong Kong people want to demonstrate that they are different from mainlanders by observing good behavior.”

Of course, how these problems are addressed will determine the direction Hong Kong comic books will take. The acknowledged “leader” of the alternative generation, Craig Au Yeung (2012), summed up the dos and don’ts for the future:

There needs to be more collaboration with mainland China and Taiwan; then, there will be a stronger voice [presentation] to international readers. And, when international readers show an interest in Hong Kong alternative comics, local readers will be more interested in them too. Comics are still paper related. Facing the paper-to-digital era, cartoonists must have a vision of future forms for their works. Doing high-quality print books is expensive, but they are still good—even as collectors’ items. The younger generation is into digital. Comic artists and traditional publishers need to make the bridge. There needs to be more discussion, more attempts, more experimentation. It is a real challenge.

Basically, what Au Yeung called for were stronger international connections, linkups with digitalization, and more experimentation.

Efforts to implement these suggestions are in progress. Mainstream publishers have had markets abroad for decades and continue to make deals in mainland China and Taiwan; alternative cartoonists have exhibited their works at international festivals and some (Chihoi, Li Chi-tak, Lai Tat Tat Wing, Yeung Hok-tak, and Ahko) have had their books published in French editions.

Digitalization is also in the process of developing, more so with mainstream than alternative comics. Electronic versions of *Chinese Hero*, *Storm Riders*, *Sun Zi’s Tactics*, and *Little Rogues* are available at online app stores. Online game enterprises have adapted mainstream titles; the largest such firm in Hong Kong, Game-one, started in 2000 by converting manga to games.

Since 2003, almost all Gameone adaptations are of local popular comic books (E. Chan 2011b, 74). Alternative comics increasingly will find a place online, as Joint Publishing teams up with Handheld Culture to produce electronic versions of Joint's Local Comics Series. For its part, the government has developed an iPhone and iPad application called Hong Kong Comics, to help disseminate these comics globally.

Experimentation with new forms, drawing styles, and stories will need to be part of future plans. Connie Lam (2012) felt that mainstream publishers must find new subject matter rather than continue to pursue only combat-oriented comics. As for alternative comics, Lam said that artists must experiment with ways to promote their books and to gain commercial success without losing their passion.

The issues facing Hong Kong comic books are daunting, but most of the problems are at least partly remediable, assuming that the mainstream and alternative join up, a major goal of the Hong Kong Arts Centre. Hong Kong comics as commercial and art forms may not be as renowned as they were in the late twentieth century, but, compared to other parts of Asia and relative to the city's size and population, they still hold a high ranking.

#### Notes

1. The English-language press also carried strips, the earliest known to this author being *Buzzy the Bee* in the *South China Morning Post* (hereafter the *Post*) in the 1950s, about a "character" who eavesdropped on Hong Kong society.

Writers about Hong Kong comics, such as Wendy Siuyi Wong, usually concentrate on Chinese-language strips, but in interviews with cartoonists Zunzi (1991) and Larry Feign (1992) I was able to piece together the history of comic strips in the English press.

In the 1960s, the *Post* strip *Hong Kong Sweet and Sour* related the antics of a bachelor tourist in pursuit of local women. It was drawn by a Frenchman, Zabo, who was in Hong Kong to paint a bar mural. *Jackson Road*, published in the *Post* in 1980, was the first regular four-panel strip in an English-language daily. The illustrations never changed, showing the backs of patrons sitting at a bar as they commented on Hong Kong's problems. Another strip, *Basher*, about an unsuccessful Hong Kong lawyer and his fellow workers (including a drunken judge), was done by a lawyer, Christopher Young, in 1984. Others appeared

in the 1980s such as Larry Feign's *Kowloon Kats* (1987) and Hope Barrett's *Spray* (1988), the latter featuring cockroaches, both in *TV Times*; Zunzi's *Through the Tiger's Eye*; Stuart Allen's *Twigg* (1987); and more.

The best-known English-language newspaper comic of the 1980s and 1990s, as both a strip in the *Post* and a series of books, was *The World Of Lily Wong* by American-born Larry Feign. The strip featured a strong-willed Chinese woman and her *gweilo* (foreign) husband, Stuart. One writer said that Feign "alternately highlights the gaffe of one culture according to the standards of the other, underlining the absurdity of racial prejudice and the shared humanity of Asians and Westerners" (Tyson 1989, 6). Feign said about his own work: "The humour is in the irony, the different ways people act around food, children, etc. Both are right in their own way, and yet they will never agree" (Allison 1994, 10–11; see also Lent 1995a, 46–47; Lent 1995c, 60–62; Feign 1986; Feign 1992).

2. Daily comic books, of which there were a few in Hong Kong from the 1960s and 1970s, are rare worldwide. In the 1940s, Mexico published daily comic books, one appearing twice on Sunday. Among those in Hong Kong were Tony Wong's *Sang Po* in 1975, and *Hei Bo*, *Ching Bo*, and *Golden Bo Daily* in the 1980s.

3. For example, *New Comics Weekly* (1962), *Epoch Comic Weekly* (1962), which became a daily in 1965, *Manhua Daily* (1963), *Cartoon and Comics Garden* (1964), *Entertainment News* (1963), which paid readers to submit comics and also issued a daily supplement, and *Radar Pictorial* (1965), a daily highlighting depictions of sword fighting imitative of Japanese manga. These tabloids were eight pages long and sometimes carried translated (and pirated) Western comics.

4. Lianhuanhua, considerably earlier than World War II, employed action in the form of "fighting, war, ghost stories, or sword-fighting epics" (W. S. Wong 2002a, 105).

5. Wendy Siuyi Wong and Lisa Cuklanz (2000, 33) wrote that, until 2000, there had been only ten women comic artists in Hong Kong. They singled out Lee Wai-chun, Chan Ya, and Lily Lau as the most successful. Lee (2012) said that, during the 1960s and 1970s, her *13-Dot Cartoon* was the only comic to use women as main characters.

6. Lee (2012) explained the character's name, saying: "My mother used to call noisy girls thirteen dots. If a girl did not like traditional girl things, liked to play with boys, she called them thirteen dots. She called me thirteen dots."

7. Tony Wong (2012) said that piracy had abated by the 2010s.

8. Wong (2012) said that Jademan had folded in October 1987 because of Hong Kong's economic crisis. I told him that I was at Jademan in 1992 and that the company was thriving. His response was, "Okay," after which he corrected himself, saying that Jademan folded in 1993 when he formed Jade Dynasty.

9. Others talked about the freedom publishers enjoyed with respect to pirating manga. One critic of the comics, Yuen Kin-to, editor of *Monthly Comic Magazine*, said: "You can do all the illegal pirating you want as the law allows you to escape. No company has been penalized; they just stop doing business and then start up again later

on" (1992). Hong Kong companies that purchased comics copyrights from the Japanese were known to sue local pirate publishers, but as *Monthly Comic Magazine* publisher Pang Chih-ming (1992) explained: "It is easy to start a company here; costs HK\$1,150, so if a pirate is sued, he closes down and starts a new company."

Similar ruses were prevalent in the mid-1990s, such as importing Chinese translations of manga reproduced in Taiwan. Technically, these are Taiwanese publications, so there is no need to buy the Hong Kong rights. One result was that the Taiwanese edition of the manga *Crayon Shin-Chan* was released in Hong Kong one full month before the Taiwan edition appeared (Clements 1996).

10. Tony Wong (2012) said that Taiwanese distributors pay for the shipping.

11. Jade Dynasty compiles three books totaling about eighty pages for the Taiwanese market. Tony Wong (2012) said: "For Taiwan, we combine three stories into one book. For those who want the comic book urgently, we send copies of individual titles by airmail. When the unsold ones are returned to us, we combine three into a book and send these back to Taiwan by seemail."

12. So called, according to Khoo (2012), because "the comics business is in a dark era now. Sales have dropped a lot. My company, I hope, will break through the dark to the light."

13. Ma Long, a prominent political cartoonist with *Ming Pao* and *Apple Daily*, founded the short-lived political humor and cartoon magazine *Fan Dou* in 1990.

14. Interviewed cartoonists used the terms "alternative" and "independent" interchangeably, as well as the terms "mainstream" and "commercial." Zunzi (2012) and Lily Lau did not make distinctions between mainstream and alternative. Zunzi said that all Hong Kong cartoonists are independent, while Lau (2012) said of herself: "To some readers, I am the mainstream. It depends on the readers' positions in society. I am not alternative, but I reflect certain opinions people don't have. At first, I thought my perspective was completely different from other people. But, we share the same things when we live in the cities—fear, desire, love. I put those common sense things in with a different angle."

Connie Lam (2012) said that, previously, mainstream and alternative comic artists were separate and distinct, but that in recent years the two groups have worked together, thinking of themselves equally as cartoonists. Only the publishers make the distinction, she said. Kongkee (2012) described alternative comics as "always changing," "simple because they are drawn quickly," and used as "a platform to show feelings."

15. *Yellow Bus*, a junior school magazine, resulted from a 1991 comic strip called *Mcmug* in *Ming Pao Weekly* magazine. Created by Alice Mak and Brian Tse, the urban piglet character *Mcmug* became a television sensation later in the 1990s (see Hu 2001).

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# 소학생

마산부 상남동 7가

★ 53 호 ★ 어린이집





## Manga and Manhwa

Invariably, one of the first questions to come up in a discussion of Korean comics (*manhwa*) is: how do they differ from Japanese manga? Such a query is justified, because manhwa creators for years imitated manga in drawing style, format, character depictions, and story lines, and because people involved in Korean comics are themselves often hard pressed to explain the differences, simply stating that they are subtle or emotional.

Efforts to Koreanize manhwa have kept the differences/similarities discussion on the table. Lee Sun-Young (2007) unhesitatingly wrote that manhwa “generally looks and reads very much like manga” and that little “distinguishes it in terms of form or content from its more popular Japanese counterpart.” Earlier, critic Im Bum (1994), claiming that Korean characters and cartoon styles are still very Japanese, avowed that “cartoonists don’t have to put the characters in traditional garb and settings, but they have to draw with a sense of familiarity and originality and touch Korean feelings.” Researchers Kim Nak-Ho (2003) and Seon Jeong-U (2003) talked about similarities and differences, Kim insisting that “[p]ublishers who say Korean comics do not have a manga style are talking trash; you can’t tell Japanese and Korean comics apart.” He explained:

Japanese and Korean comics both have an Asian traditional way of drawing—using black and white line, and emptiness between lines and panels. All share the same basic principles. It is not clever to say Korean comics are different from Japanese as they share the same Asian graphic style. The difference is what lies beneath the comics’ style. Mainstream Korean comics use more drama, narrative. Mainstream Japanese manga are more concerned with building up individual characters and personalities. It is a cultural difference. Korea, through its cultural background, emphasizes more the forces of society and history beyond the individual. In Japan, the focus is more on the individual.

Seon (2003) said that the difference between Japanese and Korean comics was that “the Japanese went their

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# Korea

own way after the initial influences from outside, but Korean comics just kept being influenced from outside.” He said that Korean comics are open to impacts from Japan, Europe, and elsewhere. “The Japanese market does not import much; someone called manga the comics of Galápagos Islands in that they isolate themselves,” Seon said.

Those contending that manhwa already has distinguishing characteristics are no less adamant. The owner of an all-woman-run independent publishing company felt that female lead characters in manhwa are stronger and more modern than those of manga (S.-Y. Lee 2007); another publisher said that manhwa was more personal than the “industrial,” studio-style manga (S.-Y. Lee 2007). A Japanese professor, Sajima Akiko (cited in Kwon 1998), favored manhwa comics because they have “deep thoughts that Japanese comics lack.” Kim Mun-Hwan, editor in chief of Seoul Cultural Publishers, one of the main manhwa producers, said that differences between manhwa and manga were becoming more apparent, explaining: “The shapes of Korean eyes and faces are drawn more softly than Japanese; Korean comics have round lines while manga have sharper, straighter ones. Korean books are read front to back; Japanese from back to front, and Korean comics do not have the blatant violence and sex, bleeding scenes, amputations, and so on” (Kim 1994).

It seems natural that resemblances between manhwa and Japanese comics exist, because manga has had a strong presence in Korea since the 1960s. What is difficult to fathom is that manga has continued to thrive despite prohibitive and all-encompassing government legislation, outcries from parental groups and the press, and action on the part of Korean cartoonist associations.

Complaints about children’s comics from various quarters initially focused on the poor overall quality of their stories, churned out in rapid fire to make quick profits. Believing that the government was about to come down hard on the industry because of the poor quality of manhwa and the manga influences, some responsible publishers and cartoonists formed Hanguk Adong Manhwa Jayulwhoe (Korean self-regulation

body for children’s cartoons) in December 1961. Artists and writers were asked to register with the group and submit their work for scrutiny by veteran cartoonists. When this tactic did not result in better-quality comics, the publishers, with government backing, implemented severe censorship. Smaller, newly established publishers generally ignored these bureaucratic initiatives.

In August 1968, the government, not appeased, replaced the self-regulatory body with Hanguk Adong Manhwa Yuliwiwonwhoe, its own ethics committee with precensorship powers. A month later, President Park Chung-Hee ordered the supervision of what were termed deleterious comics, which already a year earlier had been listed by the government as one of the six evils of society. Cartoonists reacted by forming the Hanguk Association of Children’s Cartoonists on October 11 (see Oh 1981, 14–20).

The scrutiny intensified in the 1970s as children’s comic books gave way to adult comics, many full of violent and sexual material. The government again acted, implementing a revised bill aiming to protect the underaged. Quickly, the tough legislation was put to use. A 1980 crackdown by the Korean Social Purification Committee resulted in arrests, indictments for violating the Juvenile Protection Law, and the withdrawal of authorization for nineteen publishers. The offensive material contained “realistically described scenes of violent or obscene acts which might arouse criminal impulses in children” (*Mecha* 1986, 6). In September 1980, the government’s ethics committee prohibited subject matter that contained cruelty, sensationalism, or viciousness (Oh 1981).

Pirated Japanese comic books circulated freely despite these strictures; more than fifteen thousand comics rental shops operated in the mid-1980s, circulating manga and books created in local studios. Strangely, a 1987 government reprieve that permitted local publishers registered with the authorities to print anything they wished without prior censorship, opened the floodgates to manga. Publishers bent on making fast profits turned out even more “vulgar” titles than before (*Newsreview* 1991, 28). Adult titles included sentiments

such as, “It feels good to kill someone”; characters who were “merciless hitmen, detectives without authority to kill offenders and men keen on decadent womanizing”; and love themes that “can’t do without homosexuality, sexual perversion and bawdy love stories” (*Newsreview* 1991, 28).

Besides its perceived negative effects upon the Korean value system and morality, manga also represented a serious threat to the publication of homegrown Korean comics. In 1993, the president of the Korean Cartoonists Association lamented that 70 percent of the comics market was already dominated by Japanese books, 90 percent of which were pirated (*Comics Journal* 1993, 24).

Reasons that Koreans preferred manga are those often given universally: high readability, superior graphics, emphasis on superheroes, and inexpensiveness (three to four times cheaper in pirated versions than manhwa). They were popular also because of some linguistic and lifestyle similarities between the two countries. In the 1990s, the Korean Ethics Committee for Books, Magazines, and Weekly Newspapers and cartoonist groups made stringent efforts to curb the sex- and violence-laden Japanese imports. The committee continued precensorship until 1992. “We stopped precensoring Japanese comics for a month in 1992 and then altogether,” Cha Ae-Ock, the one full-time member of the committee, said, “because it was illogical” (1994). She explained: “All Japanese culture of a low type was banned, therefore, to precensor comics meant some could come in, but this was not the law.” Cha told how the ethics committee was organized and what it looked for in censoring:

Comic Books and Advertising is one of three divisions of the ethics committee, the other two being magazines and general books. The others have a chief and three members, but Comics and Advertising has a chief and six members. The entire committee meets monthly, each division every other week. We do precensorship of the comic books, meant mainly for the rental market, and postcensorship of comics magazines sold in bookstores. With precensorship,

we delete inappropriate materials or ban the books, while with postcensorship, we give two warnings after which we turn the case over to the government for action. We have no punitive capability, although the committee is funded by government. Besides monitoring and censoring, other duties of the committee are analysis of the comics market and the making of public policy. Policy making involves suggesting laws and promotion of cartoonists (but not with money).

What we are looking for are cases of obscenity and violent content. Some kisses are all right, but deep kisses are not. Generally, however, kissing is okay. But, there can be no nudity, profanity, stabbings, blood, shootings, amputations, etc. In children’s comics, showing a weapon is allowed, but not its use. In rental shop comics, use of weapons can be depicted because these are not just for children. In Korea, communism is a big, big problem, so artists cannot write about it in the comics. They can talk about North Korea, but they cannot praise the country. (Cha 1994)

The committee was not very effective primarily because it was understaffed, yet it was expected to precensor more than seven thousand comics yearly. Also, it was stymied by changing and often vaguely defined legislation, public sentiment for the gradual liberalization of Japanese cultural products, and pirated manga that was “doctored” so well that the committee unknowingly placed its seal of approval (*Asian Mass Communication Bulletin* 1993, 7).

Resistance to manga persisted among some cartoonists, who, in 1992, formed Uri Manhwa Hyophoe (Our cartoon association), a body that led a public demonstration that year ridiculing Korean artists influenced by manga and calling for a boycott of their works. It also issued a newsletter, lobbied the government to curb Japanese comics, mounted an antimanga exhibition, and encouraged the Koreanization of comics (J.-D. Park 1992).

Koreanization efforts included the publication of more comics magazines as opposed to comic books (both pirated and Korean comics factory versions) for the rental shops; continual crackdowns on dealers of Japanese and lewd comics; and government harassment





FIG. 4.1. Korea's first newspaper cartoon, published in *Taehan Minbo*, June 2, 1909.

of the comics rental business (Roh 1994). In 1993, the government passed a law (that became effective in 1996) that banned comics rental shops within two hundred meters of educational institutions.

### Historical Perspectives<sup>1</sup>

The first newspaper cartoons in Korea appeared while the country was under Japanese administration; in fact, the very first was published in the initial issue of *Taehan Minbo* (June 2, 1909), a paper that, although very critical of the occupation, owed its existence to the Japanese resident general who had authorized it and other private newspapers to publish (B.-G. Kim 1965, 64–65).

After a bloody crackdown on independence demonstrators on March 1, 1919, the Japanese changed their strategy, emphasizing cultural rather than militaristic tactics. New dailies such as the *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo* offered additional outlets for cartoonists. The *Dong-A Ilbo*'s Kim Tong-Song, who later gained fame as a politician and diplomat, taught his cartooning skills to others, who in turn promoted the profession in the 1920s.

The 1920s spawned the first completely plotted cartoons (similar to U.S. comic strips) and the so-called



FIG. 4.2. *Meongteonguri Heotmulkyeogi* (The vain efforts of an idiot), Korea's first newspaper strip. A series in the *Chosun Ilbo*, October 17–December 21, 1924.

readers' cartoons. The first plotted cartoon was Kim Kyu-Son's *Pong-ui-i wa Kim Pyol-chang-i* in the monthly magazine *Yadam* (Hidden stories), and the first newspaper strip was No Su-Hyeon's *Meongteonguri Heotmulkyeogi* (The vain efforts of an idiot) in the *Chosun Ilbo* in 1924. Usually, the story and artwork of these cartoons were done by different individuals. Readers' cartoons, started in 1920, were meant to give a voice to the common people. They appeared in special sections of daily newspapers—*Donga Manhwa* in the *Dong-A Ilbo*, *Ch'ul P'il Sajin* in the *Chosun Ilbo*, and *Chibang Manhwa* in the *Sidae Ilbo*. Readers' cartoons have continued into modern times, but their most prosperous period was the 1950s and 1960s, when cartoonists with more experience commented on them and even instructed the amateurs (Yun 1986). In the 1970s, readers' cartoons ran two or three times weekly, provided by freelancers who eventually organized into a collaborative group. When dailies needed cartoons, they pulled works from that group. Cartoonist Kim Pan-Guk (1992) said that from that group “rose the major cartoonists of today.”

The prosperous period did not last long. By the mid-1920s, newspapers critical of the Japanese occupation were suspended (some closed), and the readers' cartoons disappeared for a time. Cartoons with political messages were replaced by children's and humor manhwa. Throughout the 1930s, the remaining newspapers favorable to the Japanese, such as the *Maeil Sinbo* and *Kyongsong Ilbo*, used cartoons that attempted to legitimate Japan's buildup of militarism, boost soldier morale, and severely criticize the Allied forces.

In the immediate post-World War II era, newspaper cartoons of any type were slow to reappear; in fact, they were not very prominent until the Republic of Korea was established in the southern half of the peninsula in 1948. Kim Kyu-Taek resumed his career with commentary cartoons and the strip *Jung Soo Dong*, and Kim Yong-Hwan, who had returned from Japan, where he had debuted as a cartoonist under the name Gita Koji, drew his character Kojubu (Mr. Nosey) in the *Korea Times*, as well as the strip *Kkangt'ong Yosa*. Other pre-Korean War newspaper strips were *Meongteonguri*



FIG. 4.3. A Kim Yong-Hwan comic book, *Kojubu Samgukji* (Kojubu three kingdoms), 1952.

*Heotmulkyeogi*, whose authorship changed from No to Kim Chung-Hyon; *Sam-p'ar-i* (Thirty-eight degrees latitude, the boundary between North and South Korea), drawn by Paek Mun-Yong; and *So Ch'am P'an* by Lim Dong-Eun (Oh 1981, 15).

Some of these artists also drew for magazines and comic books. For example, the art of Im Tong-Un, Kim Kyu-Taek, and Kim Ui-Hwan was carried by children's magazines such as *Sohaksaeng*, *Sonyo*, *Chindallae*, and *Orini nara*, while that of Kim Yong-Hwan was featured in the adult magazine *Sinin*. They, along with Kim Ki-Ch'ang and Ch'oe Yong-Su, also did comic books that were irregularly published but very popular.

At least three cartoon magazines targeted to the general public had brief runs between 1945 and 1950. The first, *Manhwa Haengjin* (Parade of cartoons), was started by the poet Kim So-Un. The sixteen-page tabloid, issued for street sales every ten days, featured the cartoons of Kim Yong-Hwan, Kim Ui-Hwan, and Im Tong-Un. The magazine ran into difficulties from its first



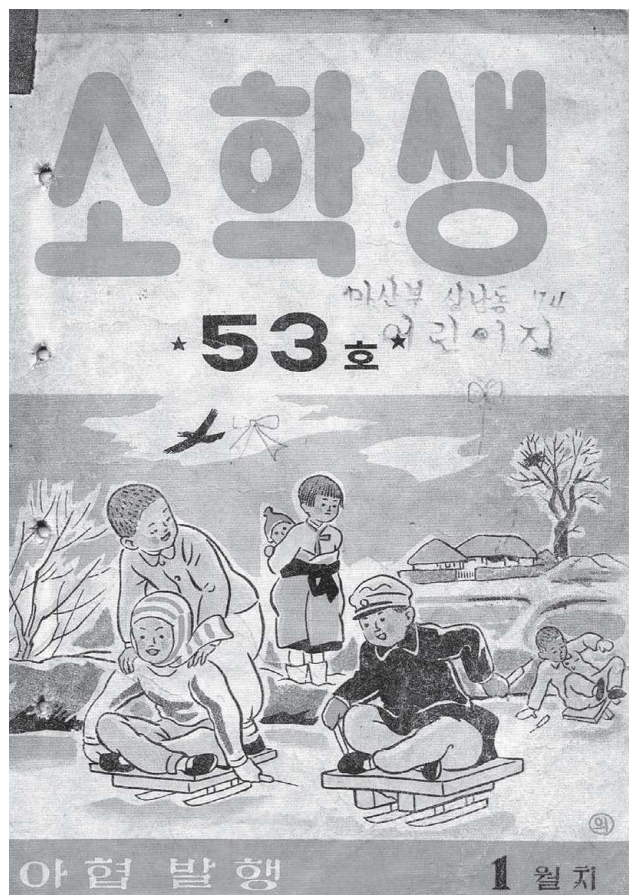


FIG. 4.4. *Jugan Sohaksaeng* (Young students' weekly), no. 53, 1947.

issue, when, because of a political crisis, its street sales were prohibited. Only three issues of *Manhwa Haengjin* were published before it was suspended by the Ministry of Education. Shortly after, a weekly, *Manhwa News*, was established, eventually enjoying a huge circulation of forty-six thousand. In its brief life, *Manhwa News* attracted the art of Kim Yong-Hwan, Kim Ui-Hwan, Kim Song-Hwan, Sin Tong-Hon, and Yi Yong-Jun. When publisher Song T'ae-Sik and cartoonist Kim Yong-Hwan ran into some troubles in 1950, Kim split and published *Manhwa Sinmun*, which appeared twice before the Korean War. The magazine was resuscitated in the post-war period (Oh 1981).

During the Korean War (1950–1953), cartoonists in the south got on the side of the military, some drawing for the Defense Department's *Manhwa Sungni* (Cartoon victory) and the army's *Sabyong Manhwa* (Soldiers' cartoon), others such as Kim Kyu-Taek and Kim Ui-Hwan fashioning cartoon flyers for propaganda against the northern enemy. Some civilian cartoonists created

comics that portrayed brave South Korean soldiers, among them Kim Yong-Hwan, whose popular *Tot'ori Yongsu* (Brave soldier Tot'ori) lasted for four issues beginning in 1952. The first anticommunist comic books also came out of that period, an example being Kim Jung-Rae's *Bool Geun Tang* (Red land) (Oh 1981). Other Korean War comic books included the sixteen-page *Kojubu T'amjong* (Detective Kojubu) by Kim Yong-Hwan, and *Ongt'ori Moggongso* (Phony carpenter) by Sin Tong-Hon. A cartoon magazine, *Manhwa Sinbo*, launched by Kim Song-Hwan, sculptor Yun Hyo-Jung, and journalist Pak Song-Hwan, lasted for seven or eight issues during wartime.

Both comic books and newspaper strips had boon periods after the war. *Millim ui Wangja* (Prince of the jungle), a popular one-hundred-page Japanese import, appeared, followed shortly after by the twice-as-large *Manhwa Segye* (World of cartoons), *Manhwa Sonyon* (Cartoon boy), *Manhwa Haksaeng* (Cartoon student), *Manhwa Wang* (Cartoon king), and others. Many of these comic books relied on stories taken from children's magazines, some from children's stories of other countries.

Popular after 1955 were the four-panel cartoons that have graced daily newspapers in South Korea to the present day. Difficult to categorize, these drawings are both political cartoons and comic strips, the latter because they carry a regular title (with symbolic meanings) and portray the same character every day. Always featured on the cultural or social page (in Korean papers, the next-to-the-last page) and displayed in a small, vertical format, they are numbered consecutively and top a one-column, one-inch advertisement. That tiny advertisement has the most expensive rate in all the Korean dailies, four to five times the normal fees. Kim Song-Hwan (1992) said that advertisers "must wait for that space; they have to show they have advertised consistently with big advertisements before they can even be considered for that space." Cartoonist Yun Yong-Ok of the *Seoul Sinmun* (1992) claimed that some advertisers contract by the year for the space under the four-panel cartoons.





**FIG. 4.5.** Strip and political cartoonist Kim Song-Hwan. Seoul, July 4, 1993. Photo by John A. Lent.

*Gobau* (High, firm rock) by Kim Song-Hwan was among the first four-panel political strips in Korean, debuting on February 1, 1955, in the *Dong-A Ilbo*.<sup>2</sup> Others appeared—*Auntie Walsun* (A tart-tongued housemaid) by Chong Un-Gyong; *Kat'uri* (Mrs. Hen Pheasant, a symbol of intelligence and diligence) by Yun Yong-Ok; *Dookobi* (Mr. Toad) by Ahn Ui-Sup; and *Ch'onggaeguri* (Blue frog, representing resistance) by Kim Pan-Guk (Yi 1992; Yun 1992; Chong 1992; S.-H. Kim 1992; P.-G. Kim 1992). The importance of these strips was noted by cartoonist Yun Yong-Ok (1992), who said that Koreans have a saying that without a four-panel cartoon, a newspaper is not worth reading.

Cartoonists working in all aspects of the profession faced the difficulty of making a living in post-World War II Korea. Kim Song-Hwan (1992) remembered: "People asked, why do cartoons? The advertising manager of my paper asked, why waste good advertising space for political cartoons?" The lack of adequate compensation and the public's negative view of cartooning discouraged young cartoonists, according to Kim (1992), who added: "We got only pennies at the papers—almost as bad as what page boys got. When I started (about 1949), cartoon reading was the hobby of children only. We had much difficulty at first. Many cartoonists dropped out because their work was not popular."

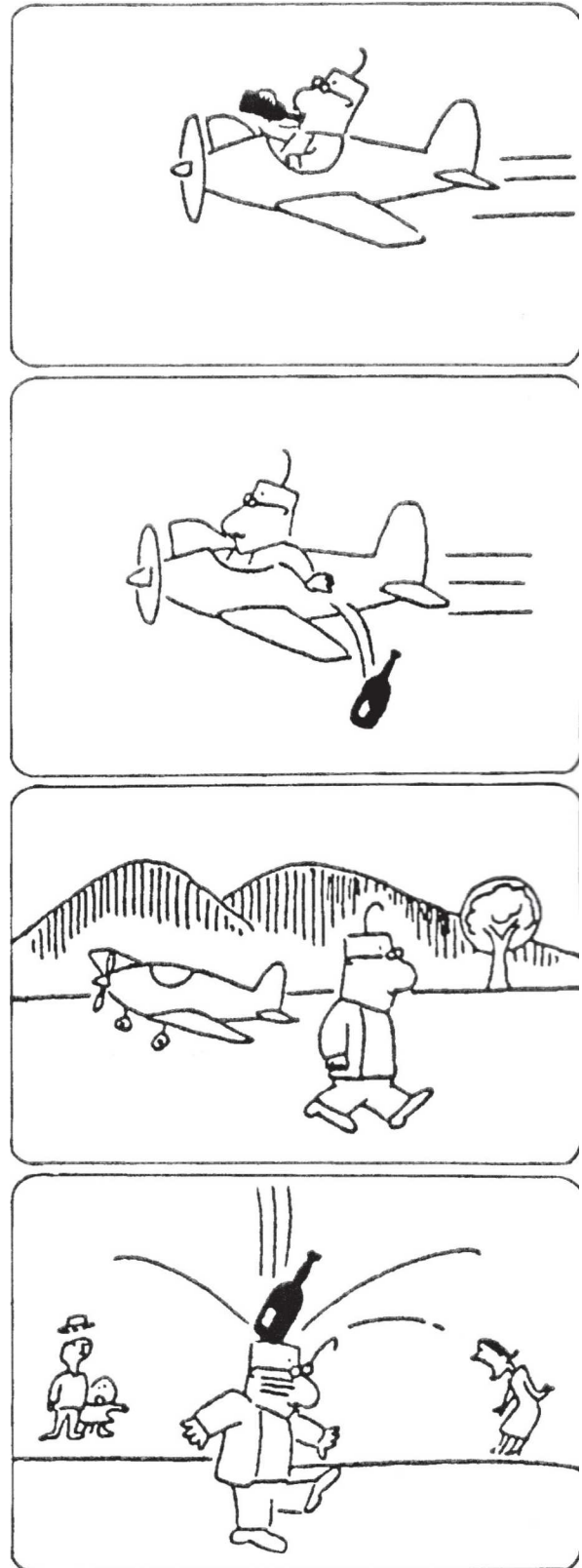


**FIG. 4.6.** An example of Kim Song-Hwan's popular strip *Gobau*, started in 1955. Courtesy of Kim Song-Hwan.

In the mid-1950s, comic book production, in the form in which it was to thrive for the next three decades, was born. From at least the late 1950s, the “comics factory”/comics rental shop system dominated. Simply stated, the writing and drawing of comics was done by a master cartoonist and student apprentices, who sent the finished product to a printer. Distributors then delivered the comics to thousands of rental shops across the country, where fans read them on the premises or checked them out for a day or two, at various rental fees.

Under this system, all comics emanating from a given studio were produced in the style of the master cartoonist and credited to him. Thus, in 1994, Park Bong-Sung’s name adorned 464 comic books; Koh Haeng-Suk, 360; Chun Je-Hwang, 258; Lee Hyun-Sae, 223, Park Won-Bin, 263; and Lee Jae-Hak, 235. Each book of 120–130 pages contained three to four serialized stories. The master cartoonist often took on other drawing responsibilities, such as comic strips or short story cartoons for sports newspapers and magazines.

A studio would employ anywhere from five to two hundred apprentices. The large- and medium-sized studios were highly organized, with a chain of command that included the master cartoonist, an editor, and a head team of ten to fifteen members. The head team, which had direct contact with the master cartoonist, did the pen work on cartoons for outside magazines and sports newspapers, the final check of comic books for rental shops, and, in cases where the studio had delved into bookstore sales, the drawing of those books. Other teams were formed at the next level down, each composed of five to fifteen apprentices, divided according to specialties. Team leaders usually had years-long associations with the master cartoonist and were able to draw exactly in his style. Students worked for pay and experience under the master cartoonist with the hope they, too, would eventually become masters with their own studios.

At their pinnacle in the 1960s and 1970s, the comics factories together produced about sixty comic books every day; these comics were so plentiful that, in 1967, they represented two-thirds of all Korean publishing. For various reasons that will be discussed below, the

comics factory system began to fade at the century’s end. In 1995, although scores of these studios operated in Korea, thirteen based in Seoul were dominant. One of these was JWH Publications, a medium-size studio established in 1990 by master cartoonist Jo Woon-Hak. JWH brought out six or seven titles yearly, each with ten to thirteen serialized volumes, for a total of sixty or seventy books. Jo created and wrote half the stories himself; the rest were done by freelancers. Apprentices spent two to five years doing background and character drawings before they were considered cartoonists (Jo 1995).

As the rental shops took a nosedive in the 1990s, JWH and other studios began doing comic books for bookstore sales. Sometimes new titles were created, but the more common practice was to condense an already published, multivolume serial into one book. Whatever procedure was used, some books ended up being rented anyway, because rental shop owners bought them from the bookstores. The rental market also slumped because the Korean economy had strengthened, meaning that many young people now had money to purchase comics; and rental shops came to be despised by parents, who saw them as hangouts where “juvenile delinquents” could drink and smoke. The precariousness of the trade led to a sharp decrease in the number of rental shops, from a high of 15,000 in the mid-1980s to 4,260 about a decade later, and to shorter tenures for shop owners, down to about three and a half years by the mid-1990s. With the implementation in 1996 of a law banning any comics rental shops within two hundred meters of an educational institution, the decline worsened even more.

To find out how rental shops<sup>3</sup> operated, this author spent a few hours with Kim Chong in his Seoul shop, Kachei. Kim (1994) said that he held down a second job in anticipation of the day when his shop would be forced to close. He thought that a number of factors increasingly made this likely—the high cost of renting his shop space, the dwindling readership of rental comics (which he attributed to poorer-quality stories), inroads made by television and video, and bookstore sales.

Kim, who started Kachei in 1982, kept an inventory of nine thousand comic books, one thousand novels, and

seven comics magazines, all neatly shelved in a basement outfitted with about half a dozen leather couches, a fan, and a television set. There were no computers, not even a cash register; Kim recorded the names and phone numbers of patrons who rented books overnight in a notebook and made change from his pocket. With help from his wife, he kept the shop open from 10:00 a.m. until midnight, seven days a week; there were no holiday closings.

Kachei was supplied by four distributors who brought books to Kim daily on their motorcycles. Kim purchased one copy of about twenty new titles monthly and displayed them for rental as long as possible, acknowledging that “many, many” were stolen. On a given day, about a hundred high school students and adolescents would read comics on the premises, and thirty would check them out. Generally, a patron read ten comics, often in a series, during an hour or two-hour sitting; those taking books out rented twenty to thirty at a time. The fees were 150 Korean won (nineteen U.S. cents) per book to read in the shop and 250 won (thirty-one cents) for a two- or three-day rental. Comics magazines were checked out at 500 won (sixty-two cents) each (C. Kim 1994).

In their heyday, rental shop owners wielded much influence, as they almost solely decided which books were bought. Because of their limited resources, they were selective, purchasing books that were likely to make a profit, were drawn by popular master cartoonists, and followed current fads. Thus, finding new talent and fresh content for comics was, structurally, nearly impossible.

There was no shortage of critics of the master cartoonist studio/rental comics shop system. Cartoon columnist Jung Joon-Young (1994), for example, believed that the system had compromised the quality of work, stating: “There is no need to write or draw well because the books are for the rental shops. By the way cartoonists are paid, there is no encouragement to do better.” Others, such as comic writer Roh Byung-Sung (1994), animator/cartooning teacher Park Se-Hyung (2003), and master cartoonist Jo Woon-Hak (1995), lamented the rampant imitation of Korean master cartoonists and Japanese

manga that went on in the studios. Comics writer and historian Lee Won-Bok (1991, 177) criticized the purchasing decisions of rental shop owners, claiming that they stifled creativity, encouraged cartoonists to imitate popular trends, and emphasized comics content that was entertaining and commercially viable but low in quality.

The birth of comics magazines in the 1980s, followed by the use of retail bookstores as comics outlets, had profoundly altered the industry by the 1990s, one change, according to Roh (1994), being that “smaller and smaller numbers of comic books are available through bigger and bigger bookstores.” Comics were also categorized differently—switching from target age groups to genres.

Comics magazines in the 1990s were mainly intended to build up an audience and provide the story lines for the comic books reprinted from them and sold in bookstores. Hwang Kyung-Tae (1994), then head of Dai Won Publishing, explained: “You can’t make money from comics magazines; the money comes from reprinting. We make comics magazines because, without them, we can’t do reprints. Comics magazines are like advertisements for the reprints, attracting as many readers as possible to the reprinted books.”

This arrangement suited the cartoonists, who stood to be paid twice for their work, once when it appeared in the comics magazines and again when reprinted. However, fewer cartoonists had this opportunity, and with the hastening demise of rental shops, many who worked for the studios faced bleak futures. One of the ways master cartoonist studios coped was by providing comics to the bookstores, usually by condensing many-volumed serializations into a single book. By 1995, twenty comics magazines existed.<sup>4</sup> Two companies, Dai Won Publishing and Seoul Cultural Publishers, brought out fifteen of these titles.

Dai Won Publishing is the dominant division of a five-pronged corporation, Dai Won, which specializes in the production of animation, comics, video, and “fancy” (cartoon-related) merchandise. The company builds tie-ins among these products, according to Ahn Hyun-Dong (1994), president of the animation division.



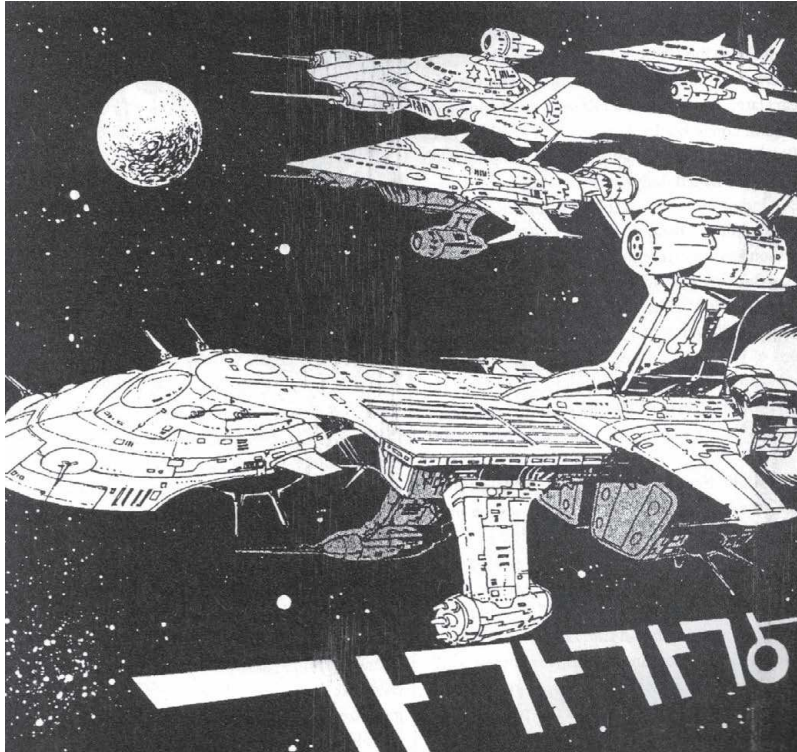


FIG. 4.7. A science fiction serial story in *Wolgan Sonyun Champ*, a publication of the Dai Won group. Courtesy of Ahn Hyun-Dong.

Comics magazines appear first, which are spun off into comic books and animation, and later video. The parent firm started out in 1974 as Won Production, and the publishing division was launched in 1991.

Working on the principle of growing with its audience, Dai Won creates new magazines as readers advance in age. Thus, the monthly *Wolgan Sonyun Champ* (Monthly boy champ, established in 1992) was designed for grade schoolers; the weekly *Sonyun Champ* (Boy champ, 1991) for junior high school boys; the monthly *White* for middle to high school girls; the biweekly *Young Champ* (1994) for high school and college students; the biweekly *Twenty-Seven* for adults; and the biweekly *Touch* and the monthly *Pang Pang* for girls.

Although at least four of the magazines are gender specific, Hwang said that, when he was in charge of the publishing group, his philosophy ran counter to categorizing comics; instead, he was interested in how a story unfolds, regardless of gender ties. Hwang liked to experiment, to handle topics differently. "Instead of telling an artist what to draw, I want to see what the artist can do best; I want to develop each artist's abilities," he said (1994).

Artists were recruited through two contests Dai Won sponsored annually, each of which attracted five

hundred to six hundred contestants. "If a contestant has potential, I keep contact," Hwang (1994) said, adding that he had a pool of a thousand artists and regularly used about a hundred and fifty on a freelance basis. All artists were evaluated semiannually when their wages were adjusted. But wages were less important to cartoonists than fees from reprintings. This occurred when a popular story had a long serial life and was condensed into a single volume for the bookstores; at that point, the artist was paid a 10 percent royalty on the retail price of each book. Since a new anthology was published every two or three months when a magazine story had a long serial run, cartoonists could make a hefty sum of money.

Of course, the goal was to make a story last a long time, which Hwang worked toward by calling upon artists and writers to "stage a story" and develop interesting characters, and by seeking readers' opinions. He said that he had used playwrights, novelists, and scriptwriters to develop stories, but they all failed (Hwang 1994). After those efforts, he and other Dai Won staff conceptualized the stories in collaboration with the artists. A staff of eighteen editors, each assigned to a different title according to ability and preference, put the stories into shape. Hwang (1994) said that only two of the editors were women, because "the job requirements are very



FIG. 4.8. Seoul Cultural Publishers' *Big Jump*, no. 13, August 1995. Courtesy of Kim Mun-Hwan.

difficult, and males think of the job as permanent while females view it as premarriage." Reader reactions were obtained through a postcard questionnaire inserted in each magazine; about ten thousand were returned monthly. Hwang said that the editors used this feedback to decide which stories to develop.

Most Dai Won comics magazines averaged 350 to 375 pages, except for monthlies such as *Wolgan Sonyun Champ*, which topped 550 pages. A weekly magazine had about twenty-two stories. Hwang said that the stories were unique and not copies of manga, although they might resemble manga. Prices per copy varied according to the number of pages, quality of paper, and circulation, but they normally fell within the 1,500 won (US\$1.90) to 3,000 won (US\$3.80) range. Dai Won's distribution system revolved around eighty "locations," which trucked the comics magazines and books to outlying areas for 10 percent of the cover price. Bookstores took another 20 percent and were preferred over newsstands, which demanded 60 percent. Dai Won's comics magazines

and books were also reprinted in Japan, Taiwan, and the United States, in the latter case for Korean Americans (Hwang 1994). Dai Won's success enabled it to spin off a new company, Haksan, in 1995.

Another example of a new-generation comics publisher of the 1990s is Seoul Cultural Publishers, started in 1988 as publisher of the women's magazine *Woman Sense*. The same year the company issued *Weekly IQ Jump*, its first comics magazine, designed for fourth grade through middle school students. *Monthly IQ Jump* came out in 1992, targeted to pre-fourth grade children. As the audience for these magazines matured, Seoul Cultural Publishers inaugurated the monthly *Comic Young Jump* in 1994, for the eighteen- to twenty-three-year-old market, and *Wink* in 1993, for women. Both *Weekly IQ Jump* and *Comic Young Jump* had circulations of two hundred thousand by the mid-1990s, making them the largest comics magazines in Korea.

Popular stories in the comics magazines ended up as comic book serials, some of which sold a hundred thousand copies per volume. Seoul Cultural published a new book based on a best-selling serial title every month for five months, then slackened the pace to one every three months. In 1994, the company issued 102 books based on twenty-eight series, the total circulation of which was three to four million, or an average of thirty thousand per book. There was no fixed number of books in a series; the range varied from two to thirty-seven, the latter a translation of the Japanese *Dragon Ball*.

Editor in Chief Kim Mun-Hwan controlled both the stories and drawings of the magazines and books, which, in the beginning, was a bone of contention with older cartoonists who did not appreciate such strong management. Kim (1994) said that the artists grew to accept, and even welcome, his help. The company employed sixteen full-time and eleven part-time cartoonists. New cartoonists were encouraged with awards and opportunities to attend workshops on creating story lines, editing, and drawing, and they were paid higher than average rates. Expected to meet a quota of sixteen pages a week, a beginning cartoonist could earn up to US\$2,400 monthly; a star, up to US\$8,000. However, the

cartoonists had to pay for two or three assistants out of their own salaries (M.-H. Kim 1994).

Manhwa indeed became a vibrant part of Korean culture in the 1990s. Industry figures showed it. In 1990, 4,130 comic book titles were published in South Korea, accounting for 9 percent of the country's total periodicals. Those books came out in 6,833,681 copies, or 2.7 percent of total periodical sales. Slightly more than a decade later, in 2001, the figures multiplied very significantly to 9,177 titles (21.5 percent) and 42,151,591 copies (36 percent) (N.-H. Kim 2003).<sup>5</sup>

The advancement of comics and cartoons professionally tells a similar story of success. During the decade, undoubtedly because of strong government financial and moral support, comics and animation were boosted by an intricately designed infrastructure of associations and agencies, a large number of university and college programs, and a wide variety of support activities such as festivals, institutions and centers, books and periodicals, and libraries and museums. For example, agencies dealing with comics can be found in the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism's Korean IT Promotion Agency, and character business groups under two other agencies aid the comics industry at times. The Korea Culture and Content Agency (KOCCA), established in 1997, allocates US\$3 million yearly for comics, awarding companies on the basis of their artistic strategies. Additionally, numerous professional associations, some affiliated with the government, work on behalf of comics—the Korean Alliance of Cartoonists, the Korean Cartoonists Association, the Association of Comic Books, the Korean Women's Comics Association, and the Korean Society of Cartoon and Animation Studies.

Two vital centers, the Bucheon Cartoon Information Center and the Seoul Animation Center, were launched on May 1 and 2, 1999, respectively, with metropolitan government funding. Bucheon, located sixty kilometers from Seoul, has become the comics capital of Korea, drawing fans and tourists to its annual comics festival, museum, and other activities. Eighty percent of the center is funded by the Bucheon city government, the rest

by the provincial government and the culture industry. Center director Cho Kwan-Je (2003) said that his goals at the outset were to upgrade the public image of comics as something more than low culture, to make comics educational and artistic as well as commercially viable, and to preserve old Korean comics.

The Bucheon International Comics Festival, launched in 1998, took on international dimensions in 2002 by inviting participants from around the world. The festival's director, Song Dae-Ho (2003), said that, prior to this, Korean audiences had had few opportunities to see foreign (nonmanga) comics. The center's comics museum rivals those worldwide in space, scope of activities, decor, and comprehensiveness (as observed by the author in 2003 and 2010). Despite its name, the Seoul Animation Center includes comics within its purview, offering substantial financial support to deserving comics writers and providing space for a cartoon/comic book library, a cartoon museum featuring foreign and domestic comic books, and a "hall of fame." The center is fully funded by the Seoul municipal government, according to Director Kim Jae-Jung (2003).

Government involvement in comics and animation, which gathered steam in 1994 (mainly because animation had become one of Korea's major cultural exports), led to a spurt in animation and comics education. In 1994, a single junior college in South Korea offered a program in animation and comics; by the decade's end, there were at least 156 university, college, and high school departments in these fields.

Ironically, much of the growth of manhwa occurred during the 1997 and 1998 economic downturn that devastated Korea. "Many of the newly unemployed thought comics rental shops were the next business for them, and many shops sprang up," researcher Kim Nak-Ho (2003) explained, adding: "[T]he mentality was that you didn't need to know anything to run a shop—someone gives you the comic books and you run the shop." In 1997 and 1998, publishers increased their output of titles to accommodate the huge numbers of unemployed who whiled away free time renting and reading comics. Over





FIG. 4.9. Korea's first girls' comics magazine, *Renaissance*, made its debut in 1988.

a year's time, sales jumped from 23.6 million to 33 million (Russell 2008, 200).

As the economy started to revive, the need for comics as a diversion diminished, as did the number of rental shops. Publishers found themselves with the dilemma of having too many titles on hand. For example, of the 9,177 titles published annually, four major publishers accounted for 60 percent of that total, meaning that each of them was putting nearly 1,400 titles on the market every year.<sup>6</sup>

The comics industry, for years dominated by these major publishers, by the end of the twentieth century saw the advent of newcomers such as small presses, long-standing publishers new to comics, and what Kim Nak-Ho (2003) and Park In-Ha (2003) called the "very independent press." The small press evolved in that crucial time of 1997 and 1998 and slowly gained power in 2001 and 2002, mainly because of the major publishers' errant strategies. As Kim Nak-Ho (2003) explained, the majors published new titles "so quickly and often, they could not stick with one title and make it sell well. The small press took the time to nurture its fewer titles." Each small press produced about twenty titles a year, many of which were autobiographical or artist oriented. The largest of these companies were Bada, Happy Comic Store, and Pathfinder; their main products were

reprinted classics<sup>7</sup> and comics created by independent artists. Like small presses everywhere, they have had trouble making money.

Some long-standing publishers such as Munji, Hyunmun, and Anibooks published comics for the first time in the late 1990s. Their strength was that they had their own distribution lines and promotional capabilities. Park In-Ha (2003) characterized their comics as essayistic, of short breadth, sensitive, and about everyday life. A number of their titles became best sellers, partly because these companies had the marketing savvy required to create best sellers. The "very independent press," on the other hand, was likened to Japan's *dojin* press—fan-produced books done for self-expression, not profit.

### Comics in the 2000s

Many contemporary trends in manhwa germinated in the 1980s and 1990s, among them the advent of *soonjung* and *haksup* manhwa, the increasing use of the Internet as a comics venue, the expansion of overseas markets, and synergistic connections to other mass media.

Soonjung manhwa, or manhwa for girls, appeared as early as the 1960s, drawn by women who created their



FIG. 4.10. *Sword of Fire*, a girls' comic by Kim Hye-Rin.

own comics while also copying Japanese *shōjō* manga or plot lines from Western stories. The real breakthroughs came in the 1980s, when dedicated artists such as Kim Hye-Rin began their careers and when the first girls' comics magazine, *Renaissance*, came out (in 1988). The latter was important because it and its successors sold in retail bookstores, which girls were more apt to frequent than traditional comics rental shops. Soonjung manhwa devotes much content to sexuality and romance, but its broader concerns include every type of human relationship as well as topics such as sports, everyday life, history, horror, and science fiction. Earlier looked down on, soonjung manhwa had gained much respect by 2000.

Women draw other types of comics besides soonjung; in fact, more than half of the young artists employed by boys' magazines are women (see Noh 2004). Overall, 40 percent of the comics work pool consists of women, and nine out of every ten dojin ("very independent") cartoonists in Korea are women. Female artists have their own comics association.

Haksup (study) manhwa are textbook-like, informative comics marketed to parents as necessary study aids in the highly competitive Korean educational environment. Some have become best sellers, such as an eighteen-volume mythology series that has sold more than ten million copies. Changes in the makeup of comics audiences helped germinate haksup, according to Kim Nak-Ho (2003), who explained that in the 1990s readership was high in the fourteen- to eighteen-year-old range, but, as this group grew into adulthood or focused on other media, comics for small children gained strength. Kim said that some haksup manhwa are of dubious pragmatic value, such as the best-selling *How to Survive on a One-Man Island*, with sequels giving advice on how to survive in a theme park, a volcano, and so on.

Comic books for educational or instructional purposes have emanated from diverse institutions, such as the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which, in 2009, began publishing and distributing, in Korea and the United States, a series featuring the real-life success stories of business CEOs (*Dong A-Ilbo* 2009); and the Korean National Police Agency, which, also in 2009, published a comic book to inform students about the dangers posed by North Korea (Rowland and Hwang 2009). One commercial publisher, Dasan Books, which, beginning in 2010, released fifty graphic novel biographies of world figures, set up a branch office in the United States to attract foreign school sales (Chung 2010).<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps the most monumental impact on manhwa since 2000 has been that of the Internet, viewed as a curse by some and a blessing by others. In fact, it has been both. The Internet and all of its accoutrements have certainly had negative effects on sales of printed manhwa—from 42.2 million copies in 2001 to 20.7 million copies in 2006. Mark James Russell (2008, 201) delineated the chain of events that led to these plummeting numbers:

A big problem began when the comics fans started putting their favorite comics online, to be read by anyone for free,



FIG. 4.11. An online essay *manhwa*, “Marineblues.”

faster than the authorities could crack down on copyright violations. But a bigger problem was that comics suddenly had more competition than ever before. Games like *StarCraft* and *Ragnarok* (based on the manhwa, ironically enough) kept young people glued to cathode-ray tubes all over Korea, hour after hour, time once spent reading comics. Movies were on the rise too, further competing for people’s time and money.

The Internet rebirthed manhwa as well, opening new venues for established cartoonists as well as for amateurs, who would have found it nearly impossible to have their work printed conventionally. The webzine *Hacking* started the online comics trend. Founded in 1999 by Haksan Publishing and some Internet startup companies, *Hacking* concentrated on new talent, but, as with a number of its successors, the service did not endure (Russell 2008, 201). Korea’s leading role in the adoption of high-speed broadband Internet in the early 2000s spearheaded the surge in online comics, also called essay cartoons or essay comics. Kwon Jae-Woong (2005, 320–21), who analyzed 151 essay cartoons in late 2004, defined Korean web comics generally as book and nonbook: the former similar to typical printed manhwa and requiring payment; the latter, mostly free, further classified as commercialized and noncommercialized. Commercialized manhwa are regularly provided

by existing media (newspapers, portal sites), while noncommercialized manhwa are independent, posted irregularly at the whim of the cartoonists expressing their emotions and opinions.

As defined by Kwon (2005, 322–23) essay cartoons are managed technologically and financially by nonspecialists; do not follow typical manhwa in style, format (most are vertical), or length (almost limitless); normally are cartoonists’ diaries of their lives and opinions; have no fixed parameters for their characters (some are animals or fruits, others completely unreal); do not conform to limitations with respect to letter fonts and colors; have different ways of reaching readers (interactive in real time); and possess the ability to mix and compose different types of images (photographs, illustrations).

Kwon (2005, 332–33) reported that the topics of essay comics commonly are “mental stress, love, friendships from school life and working life, and the relationship with friends, colleagues, and lovers.” An especially popular online comic dealing with love was Shim Seung-Hyun’s *Papepopo*, which appeared in 2002, initially relating a love “crush” Shim experienced at university (Russell 2008, 201–2). Two printed books came out of this essay comic, selling more than a million copies. Other features of essay comics are their references to and tie-ins with other mass media (movies



and animation), their use of parody (especially with manga), and their play on the bizarre, weird, disgusting, vulgar, and cruel. Several essay sites present more than one cartoon. *Imugu* was made up of seven cartoons, each with its own main character; *Marineblues*, about the everyday life of a character presented in maritime settings and voices, was posted in several languages.

To sum up, essay comics have allowed people to debut as cartoonists more easily; have lent themselves to greater possibilities for commercialization, with their built-in audiences; and have led to the Koreanization of manhwa.

As indicated earlier, the Korean government became heavily committed to animation and comics production, first in 1994 and then again in 1997–1998 and in 2008. The third stimulus package of 2008, provided by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism, allocated US\$33.3 million to develop comics by 2013 into what the ministry called “killer content” for a global market. The package also included US\$67 million for animation, US\$40 million for character-driven content, and US\$134 million to develop human resources (Han 2008).

Opening international markets for manhwa took on greater importance in the 2000s, as witnessed by major Korean comics exhibitions abroad (the Angoulême International Comics Festival in 2003, San Diego Comic-Con and the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2004, a Kawasaki Citizen Museum Exhibition in Japan and another at the Shenzhen International Cultural Industries Fair in China in 2007, and the Korea Society Traveling Exhibition in 2008); the establishment of manhwa publishers in the United States such as Ice Kunion and Netcomics; and the expansion of markets to China, Europe, and Southeast Asia. The major Korean comic book publishers Sigongsa, Haksan, and Seoul Cultural Publishers started Ice Kunion in 2002, while Netcomics was established in the United States in 2006 as a branch of Korea’s leading online comic book provider, Ecomix Media. Other Korean publishers such as Dasan Books have also broken into the U.S. market. By 2007, U.S. comics publishers such as Tokyopop, Dark Horse, First Second Books, and Central Park Media saw

sales potential in manhwa. That year, about 20 percent of Tokyopop’s list was manhwa; altogether, approximately one hundred manhwa titles were distributed in the United States in 2007 (S. Y. Lee 2007). Publishing manhwa in the United States had its downsides such as the longer time needed to get books into bookstores because of the country’s size, competition from the already entrenched manga, and the fact that manhwa rarely is converted to animation. More generally, the importation of manhwa also had advantages over manga in that Korean publishers thought more globally than their Japanese counterparts, automatically offered online rights with print rights, and were flexible and lenient toward experimentalism (S. Y. Lee 2007).

Actually, European countries have had the largest audiences for manhwa outside of Korea, accounting for 38.5 percent of total exports, followed by North America with 21.5 percent, Japan with 16 percent, and Southeast Asia with 12.5 percent. Latin America, Oceania, and, beginning in 2009, Africa made up the remaining 11.5 percent. Korea’s largest manhwa publisher, Dai Won, began exporting to France in 2002, and Parisian comics companies such as Casterman and Picquier have issued popular titles, including Park Kun-Woong’s *Flower* and *Massacre at Nogunri* and Choi Gyeong-Jin’s *Ancoo’s Picture Diary*.

As sales of manhwa continued to drop domestically, they garnered momentum in these foreign markets—from US\$240,000 worth of comics exported in 1999 to \$1.9 million in 2004 and \$4.2 million in 2009. Some individual exports were very popular, for example Seoul Cultural Publishers’ romantic comedy series *Goong* (Palace story) by Park So-Hee, which was translated into seventeen languages; the Japanese version, *Love Kyon*, reached about twenty volumes. In a reversal of transnational flows, the action manhwa *Kurokami* (Black God), cocreated by Lim Dall-Young and Park Seong-Woo, was written specifically for Japanese sales. Other manhwa that received a favorable reception abroad included *Priest* by Hyung Min-Woo, published in fifteen languages with sales of more than a million copies in thirty-three countries; *Ragnarok* by Lee Myung-Jin, exported

to about thirty countries, where it sold more than a million copies; *The Color of Earth*, part of a trilogy by Kim Dong-Hwa; and *Fever* and *Hotel Africa*, both by Park Hee-Jung.

Within Korea, manhwa found some relief through adaptations to other mass media, particularly films, television dramas, games, animation, and merchandise. Movies based on manhwa stretch back to *Meongteonguri*, released in 1926, but the stimulus for the strong alliance between manhwa and films began with the top box-office hit of 1986, *Vagabond Baseball Team* by Lee Hyun-Sae. Exceptional movie hits by Huh Young-Man such as *Beat* (1997), *Tazza: The High Rollers* (2006), and *Le Grand Chef* (2007) showed the potential for this synergistic relationship. Huh's comics first appeared as strips in dailies such as the *Dong-A Ilbo* and *Sports Chosun* (Noh 2007, 460). Another important conversion was *Priest*, which, in 2011, became the first Hollywood adaptation of a manhwa. Online comics also became a source for movie adaptations in the early 2000s, particularly comics by Kangfull, such as *A.P.T., A Fool, Timing*, and *The Year 1926*, and Kang Do-Ha, with *The Great Catsby* and *Romance Killer*. For no apparent reason, most movie adaptations of manhwa have been of male cartoonists' works, and television dramas have originated from female artists' works.

Television dramas often are based on manhwa, sometimes taking a circuitous route to the small screen. A prime example is *Damo*, a story about tea maids, female slaves who worked in police departments during the Chosun Dynasty era. Originally a comic strip by Ban Hak-Ki serialized in a sports daily, *Damo* then became a paperback comic book distributed to rental stores, after which it was converted into a fourteen-part TV series, reedited for the DVD and compact disc market, and rebroadcast on cable and satellite television. Later, the manhwa version was republished for retail book sales and then made into a movie entitled *Dualist*. The drama's popularity with fans evoked what was called the "Damo syndrome" (Noh 2007, 455).

Hit television dramas originating from manhwa include *Goong*, depicting the lives of a would-be modern

Korean royal family, which attracted the soonjung and thirty-plus-year-old female audience both in Korea and abroad; and Won Soo-Yeon's *Full House*, emanating first from serialization in the girls' magazine *Wink* and then from compilation in sixteen paperback volumes. With its star-studded cast and Asian settings (part of the series was filmed in Thailand), *Full House* maintained high ratings in Korea in 2004 and earned substantial revenue when exported to ten countries (Noh 2007, 464). There have been other performing arts avenues for manhwa, such as the musical stage, which featured two of Kim Hye-Rin's soonjung manhwa, and participation in music videos, one example being Chun Kye-Young's *Audition*. Games have also been lucrative by-products of manhwa. One of the most popular manhwa-based games is *Lineage*, created by Shin Il-Suk, an animator and cartoonist known for her fantasies, epics, and romances such as the manhwa *Four Daughters of Armian* and *Pharaoh's Lover*. Started in 1999, *Lineage* attracted a million players within fifteen months.

This media mix, as well as online comics, bode well for Korea's manhwa, but not in their original form. Nevertheless, traditionally printed works of manhwa continue to appear, reinventing themselves as graphic novels and high-quality reprints of classics, and ever seeking overseas markets. They survive because of the industry's stubborn persistence and willingness to experiment, and the government's refusal to let them perish.

## Notes

1. Parts of the historical perspective first appeared in John A. Lent 1995c and 1998. Because of space limitations, many important newspaper strips and manhwa throughout Korea's history have been omitted from the discussion. To fill in the gaps, see Korea Culture and Content Agency 2003.

2. Song-Hwan Kim (1992) said that the four-panel cartoons can be traced back to 1945; however, most of the early ones did not last longer than ten appearances at most.

3. Traditional rental shops that dealt solely with comics were called *manhwapang*. Shops that rented other types of books, videos, tapes, and manhwa were *doseodaeyeojeom*. These were very popular

in 1997 and 1998. Replacing both in recent years are *gamepang*, outlets where Internet games can be played.

4. Among the early comics magazines were *Manhwa Gwangjang* (1987), the first adult monthly, and *Renaissance* (1988), dedicated to *soonjung* manhwa (girls' comics).

5. Mark James Russell (2008, 194) said that the year 2000 was the peak for comic book production and consumption, with 9,329 volumes produced and 44.5 million copies sold.

6. Of course, many of these titles were non-Korean (mainly manga); in fact, foreign titles accounted for 44 percent of all titles and 62 percent of all copies of comic books circulating in Korea.

7. The reprinting of quality comics popular from the 1960s to the 1990s became fashionable and profitable in the 2000s. The books are printed on better paper with clearer impressions, thicker binding, and sometimes in hard cover (even encased in wooden boxes, as in the case of *Thermidore*). The chief reason for the reprintings is easy profits but they also fulfill adults' nostalgia for stories they read as children, offer works serialized in comics magazines but never published in book form, or complete unfinished stories or stories previously censored.

8. Kim Nak-Ho (2003) identified other popular genres in recent years as hard-boiled crime (organized crime), male adult, and *hakwon* (school). He said that organized crime stories had been around for years, but before the 1990s they had depicted a type of nationalistic organized crime directed against the Japanese. After 1990, with the increased influence of Japanese culture in Korea, crime manhwa dealt more with street fighting. Of male adult comics, Kim said that they are not particularly "hard core" and that their level of expression is not sophisticated; instead, "they are realistic stories—of treachery or forgotten friends." *Hakwon* deals with everyday life revolving around school activities and can take a romantic twist (popular with girls) or portray organized crime in school (a boys' favorite).

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加大大不加價

畫啲！  
品

你！

卡夕熱作

鄭問

深邃美麗

任正華

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帥哥

葉佐瑩

彈力

侯逸民

校園

劍峰

As they did in Hong Kong, both Japan and China played pivotal roles in the development of Taiwanese comics. Japan, which occupied Taiwan during most of the first half of the twentieth century, brought comics to the island even before Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist forces arrived in 1949. Among those who fled China with Chiang were individuals who became the first generation of Taiwanese cartoonists.<sup>1</sup>

## Chapter 5

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### The Origins

One source claimed that Chi Lung-sheng (Chen Ping-huang) created Taiwan's first "homemade comic book" in 1939; he helped spur on the comeback of comics on the island after 1949 with his strips in eight issues of *Hsin Hsin Monthly* (A. Lee 2002, 4). Much of the initial cartooning in Taiwan was composed as anticommunist propaganda (Yu 1989) or "to make people laugh under such dejected times" (cartoonist Liang Yu-ming, quoted in Y.-H. Cheng 1979). Already in 1949, the Political Military Academy trained cartoonists to draw anticommunist cartoons. At about the same time, the Liang brothers (Yu-ming and Chung-ming) started *Graphic Times*, which carried cartoons, including Yu-ming's propagandistic *Bumpkin Go South*. Liang Chung-ming (pen name Tung Fang Liang) innovated in political cartoons and comic books. In 1950, he became editor of the *Central Daily News*, where he ran a cartoon column, which included his brother's *Bumpkin Go South*. Chung-ming's comic book career revolved around *Chung-ming Comic Books*, 426 stories he collected between 1950 and 1954 (Cartoonist Association of the Republic of China 1988: 12–13).

Other comics developments came in quick succession, and in the case of Liu Hsing-chin, in an unusual fashion. Liu, credited with pioneering Taiwanese comic books with *Hsun Hsien Chi* (Finding paradise) in 1953, was an elementary school teacher concerned about comics' negative impacts. To make his point, he drew a serial strip, *Record of the Search for Immortals*, imploring students not to read comics. The campaign backfired

# Taiwan



阿三哥、大嬸婆、阿欽、小聰明、放牛校長、老牛……，劉興欽的漫畫陪伴許多人度過了美好的童年，也是台灣的集體記憶中最甜蜜的一環。



FIG. 5.1. Teacher, cartoonist, and inventor Liu Hsing-chin and his popular characters of the 1950s. Courtesy of *Sinorama*, April 2001: 78.

as Liu gained recognition as a famous comic strip artist. He contributed to numerous newspapers and magazines; by 1956, he had four successful strips running in *Mofan Shaonian* (Model youth): *Ah San Ko*, *Ta Shen Po*, *Hsiao Chung Ming*, and *Robot* (Y.-Y. Chen 1981). *Ah San Ko* (Brother Ah San) and *Ta Shen Po* (Great Auntie) were the most popular, depicting two country folk (Liu and his mother, in reality) experiencing the city for the first time (Wei 2001b, 67). *Ah San and Big Auntie Tour Taiwan* appeared first in the *Taiwan Daily News* and for a time used Taiwan's historical sites as backdrops. Liu's popular *Robot* also led him to another career as an inventor; he holds 138 national and 43 international patents. In 1971, a young reader asked Liu to prove that what he drew was true. As a result, he invented the "Robot Auto-Learning Machine," which became popular worldwide (Cartoonist Association of the Republic of China 1988: 60–61).<sup>2</sup> The robotic learning aid clapped for a correct answer and shook its head for a wrong answer. Most of Liu's inventions were educational toys, although he also invented a hot-and-cold faucet and a

mechanical pencil (M.-J. Chang 2001, 82). Liu utilized his experience as an inventor in his last comics series, *Weird Tales of Invention*.

Among other early comics artists were Niu Ko (Li Fei-meng), Chen Kuan-hsi, Chen Ting-kuo, and Chen Chin-kao (Ching Ho). Perhaps the most prominent was Niu Ko because of his prolific, high-quality work and his efforts in organizing the Cartoonist Association. Niu Ko inherited his father's painting skills, which he put to the greatest use during his peak period of creativity during the 1950s. During that time, he had strips in different newspapers simultaneously: *Lao Yu Tiao* in the *Ta Hua Evening News*, *Uncle Niu Struggles as a Guerrilla* in the *Min Tsu Evening News*, *Little Niu Sister* in the *Independence Evening News*, *Portrayal of Ching-pang Yang* in the *China Daily News*, and *Gangster Niu* in the *Credit News*. Struggle was the key element of the strips (Cartoonist Association of the Republic of China 1988, 24–25).

As a high school teacher and dean, Chen Kuan-hsi knew the thinking of students, which he reflected in the popular strip *Hsiao Pa Yeh*. During the strip's lifetime,

readers watched the naughty but kind child Hsiao Pa Yeh grow from an elementary school student to a high school teenager (W.-Y. Lin 1979). The strip appeared in the children's magazine *Student's Friend Monthly*, which Chen founded in 1953. The magazine's popularity was quickly evident as its first run of three thousand copies sold out in two days, and a second edition of twenty thousand copies sold nearly as quickly (Y.-Y. Chen 1981).

Also published in the initial issues of *Student's Friend Monthly* were folklore comic strips by Chen Ting-kuo, who began his cartoon career while in high school (Cartoonist Association of the Republic of China 1988: 16–17). Already active as a cartoonist for more than four decades, Chen drew patriotic and educational cartoons in a fine and delicate style to stimulate children's intelligence (W.-Y. Lin 1979). His most famous comic strip series was *Lu Szu Niang Tzu Yung Tseng*, about a famous woman of Chinese legend, Lu Szu Niang, who attempted to assassinate Emperor Yung Tseng.

Chen Chin-kao, a painter as well as a cartoonist, drew important political cartoons, created the very popular *Doll Soldier* in *Hsinsheng Pao* in 1950, and served as the first president of the Cartoonist Association (Cartoonist Association of the Republic of China 1988: 14–15).

Children's and comics magazines proliferated beginning in 1954 (e.g., *Elementary Students*, *Eastern Youth*, *New Students Friend*, *Studying Children*, *Modern Youth*, *Formosa Children*, and *Comics King*), providing an abundance of space for a new generation of cartoonists (including Chen Hai-hung, Yeh Hung-chia, Ba San, Lin Ta-sung, and Ying Huang) who were to spark Taiwan's golden age of comics (1950s–1960s). Other magazines, such as the agricultural biweekly *Harvest*, also published strips. The sculptor Yang Yuyu drew four-panel serialized strips in *Harvest* from 1951 to 1962. The wordless strips were very popular, especially *Big Mouth and A-Hua*, the magazine's longest-running comic, which humorously and educationally depicted the life of a farm couple introduced to modern concepts that were useful to them (R. Fang 2002, 5).

Besides Niu Ko, the other giant of the golden age was Yeh Hung-chia. During part of the 1940s, Yeh sneered



FIG. 5.2. Some of the many Taiwanese comic books of the 1950s before double-standard censorship set in. Courtesy of *Free China Review*, January 1992: 7.

at Taiwanese social conditions in the political cartoons he drew, but he quit doing these after the 1947 conflict between mainlanders who had moved to Taiwan and Taiwanese natives (the “228 Incident”). For nine years, he worked as a designer, until, in 1956, he tried his hand at cartooning Taiwanese folktales (Chiu 1990, 6). Yeh's big break came in 1958 with his character Chuko Szu-lang, who wielded a mighty double-edged sword. The first installment of what became fifty-five books appeared as *Chuko Szu-lang Struggles with Evil Party* in *Comic King* and *Comic Weekly*. Yeh's character, whose exploits took up thirty-two of the seventy-two pages of *Comic King*, was popular, stimulating fast growth in sales from two thousand to thirty thousand copies (Y.-Y. Chen 1981). Eventually, Yeh's comic books sold a hundred thousand copies weekly, and Chuko Szu-lang became important enough in local culture to become the subject of a popular song and to feature in films in 1960 and 1978. Jennifer Chiu (1990, 6) wrote about this popularity, stating: “On the day when the weekly publications published Yeh's cartoons, bookstores were filled with children who would not leave until they had finished reading.”

Chuko Szu-lang stories were based on the Chinese historical characters Chuko Kung Ming, a sage in the Three Kingdoms period (222–265), and Yang Szulang, national hero of the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127), both the embodiment of loyalty and filial piety. Other Yeh stories were built around Chen Ping, a strip hero named after the Chinese-language characters for sincerity and honesty, and Shuang Mu-lang, the subject of

twenty-four books. During his heyday, Yeh also presided over Hung-Chia Publisher, which he had established himself. However, after 1960, his star dimmed as the government looked at his work less favorably, even prohibiting some of it. A 1974 car accident left him handicapped, after which he began to reorganize his old strips and sought a loan to reprint them (Chiu 1990, 6).

Chen Hai-hung and Tsai Chih-chung were forceful comics creators during the late 1950s and early 1960s, both using *wuxia* (ancient martial arts) stories as Yeh did. Chen's signature series was *Hsiao Hsia Lung Chuan-Feng* (Young knight Chuan-Feng Lung), whose character he described as the "justice representation against communism" (quoted in W.-Y. Lin 1979). The strip was popular enough to change the frequency of the magazine in which it was published, *Exemplary Child*, from a monthly to a weekly. Chen drew up to four hundred stories monthly, all in a distinctly Chinese style that was also popular in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia (Cartoonist Association of the Republic of China 1988, 18–19). As with other Taiwanese cartoonists, Chen gave up drawing comics in 1965 because of government censorship and, instead, illustrated children's books and worked in animation.

Tsai Chih-chung, who has left an indelible imprint on the Taiwanese and international worlds of comics, started his career in 1963 with a martial arts serial strip that lasted for more than two hundred stories; he only stopped drawing the strip with the rampant censorship of the mid-1960s. Tsai switched to drawing safer soap opera cartoons and advertisements, becoming an award-winning animator with his own company, Dragon Animation Company. In 1983, he closed Dragon and returned to drawing cartoons for newspapers and magazines, turning the works of Chinese classical philosophers into comic books that sold tens of millions of copies, as will be seen later.

As an indication of the popularity of comics in Taiwan early on, twenty-six comic strip magazines existed in 1963. Single-strip comic books, first on the market in 1961, were an "alternative," produced to cope with the saturation of the magazine market (J. Wang 1995, n.p.).

## The Bleak Period

For about a generation beginning in the early 1960s, Taiwanese cartooning of all types plummeted, mainly because of the actions of various government agencies. Reacting to parents' concerns about the possible adverse effects of comics reading on learning, the Ministry of Education suggested an examination system, approved by the Executive Yuan in 1962, that would review and license comics prior to publication.

Almost immediately, the ministry's review board was sharply criticized for being biased, inconsistent, and generally unqualified to carry out its tasks. Taiwanese cartoonists pointed out that at the same time the board closely scrutinized their works, it ignored the shortcomings of imported or pirated Japanese comics, much more explicit in their portrayals of sex and violence. Publishers desirous of making quick profits recognized the board's weaknesses and, according to Niu Ko, resorted to tracing over—or copying outright—Japanese comic books and substituting Chinese dialogue. In the process, they cut out the expense of hiring local artists (Lu 1990).

The poor quality of these pirated publications and the application of a double standard raised the ire of cartoonists, some of whom quit drawing for decades. Yeh Hung-chia and Chen Ting-kuo both left the profession when they felt that producing quality work was no longer possible (Y.-Y. Chen 1981), and Chiu Hsi-hsun switched to painting, blaming board members for being "out of their depth" and dismissing the entire review process as "nit-picking, ossified, and absolutely fatal to creativity" (Lu 1990). The last straw for Chiu occurred when a board member assessed his work by asking: "Since when can dogs talk? Any child who reads this would end up in a straight jacket" (Lu 1990). On the other hand, according to Niu Ko, "nobody minded if Japanese dogs talked. They could be singing songs for that matter, and they'd still get through" (Lu 1990). Similarly ridiculous National Institute for Compilation and Translation (NICT) regulations were recorded. Cartoonist Tseng Cheng-chung said that all cartoonists were required to use the same words to represent a dog's bark, a cat's meow, or a car braking



(quoted in *Free China Review* 1992, 19), while his fellow cartoonist Hsiao Yen-chung gave another example: “There was one cartoonist who drew a comic strip based on a Chinese folk tale. It was about a kid who killed a snake to save his friend. In the strip, the kid smashes the snake’s head with a stone. But the strip didn’t pass the screening. The reason given was that when killing a snake, the correct place to smash it should be just below the head, instead of the head itself!” (quoted in *Free China Review* 1992, 20).

Other factors contributed to this dismal period for Taiwanese cartooning, such as the intensified competition for audiences when Taiwan inaugurated its first three television stations between 1962 and 1970, and the stronger control exercised by the NICT, in charge of comics censorship from 1967 to 1987 (Y.-Y. Chen 1981). One official at the NICT, Huang Fa-tze, granted that the organization functioned poorly, stating: “The censoring schedule often conflicted with the publishing schedule. Also, sometimes, publishers took out pornographic parts before comic books were sent here, and after they got the license, they put the pornographic parts back. The peak was when over five hundred comic books per year were sent to us for censoring. Gradually, publishers didn’t send the books at all—only eight or nine books per month were received. It was obvious the regulations did not work at all” (F.-T. Huang 1991). The 500 figure was underestimated, according to Chen Yueh-yun (1981), who claimed that between 1967 and 1973, from 1,000 to 4,000 domestic comic books were received annually by the NICT for review. For unexplained reasons, the number decreased to a total of 400 for the three years from 1974 to 1976, and then shot up to 2,594 (90 percent of which were manga) in 1980 after Japanese comics were subjected to censorship beginning in 1976.

The NICT was vehemently criticized for collaborating with publishers in flooding the market with manga. Although it was illegal to import Japanese comics, publishers found ways to smuggle them in, and the NICT did not seem to interfere once they were on the island, translated, and reprinted. Lu Li-chen (1990, 41) explained the consequences: “Publishers of pirated

comics evade taxes, they use cheap paper and printing, and they skim off the cream of the crop to purvey to readers only too willing to plop down for whatever’s bigger and cheaper. How can local cartoon magazines compete with opponents who don’t play by the rules?” As this was happening, local cartoonists saw their works continually rejected under strict domestic censoring, or not accepted because of their lower quality compared to manga or their copying of manga.

Criticism of the profession continued into the late 1970s and early 1980s, with an ongoing discourse in the press on the roles of cartoonists (Y. Li 1980), the relationship between editors and cartoonists (*Taipei Weekly* 1980), parental concerns about children reading comics (Chien 1980; *Asian Messenger* 1981), and, of course, NICT practices (Chi 1980; *Min Sheng Pao*, September 24, 1982).

Cartoonists complained of motivation-killing low pay, the public’s lowbrow readership behavior that favored borrowing or renting to purchasing comics, and the Taiwanese lack of appreciation and respect especially for domestic cartoonists. Veteran cartoonist Chao Ning (1986) elaborated on the latter point: “There is still discrimination against cartoonists. They are not considered intellectual or serious. The Chinese like to read sad, serious stories so they don’t think you’re important if you write comic books. They don’t even think you’re an artist. The cartoon is a very powerful medium for the kids, yet not many scholars are involved in comics production houses. Right now, people do not think of cartoons as education, but rather just as funny stuff.”

Yet, comics (mostly manga, to be sure) were extremely popular among young people, who often read them in rental stores. A 1985 survey found that eight out of ten rent-a-book stores in Taiwan subsisted on renting comics exclusively; most comics rental stores were located near schools. Rent-a-book stores purchased newly published books from wholesalers every day, 60 percent of which were comics (*Free China Journal* 1985). Because many Japanese sex- and violence-oriented comics were among these lots, parents and teachers worried about their moral influence.

The NICT increasingly irked cartoonists as it was lenient toward manga, discriminated against local comics, and, generally, operated inefficiently (*Min Sheng Pao* 1983; also Y.-C. Lin 1982a, 1982b; *Min Sheng Pao* 1982a, 1982b, 1982d). The eighth listed item in the committee's censorship regulations was particularly bothersome to the local industry, specifying that censorship of a given book had to be completed within a month. Publishers felt that the ruling was not practical, with thousands of comic books requiring primary, secondary, and final screenings within that time frame. The result was further publishing delays for local comics (Y.-C. Lin 1983).

There were antimanga campaigns, some of which cartoonists joined. In 1983, the "Following Wind" movement rounded up 45,500 Japanese comics considered pornographic. The campaign followed a public outcry against the NICT's 1980 approval of a Japanese comic that included sexually explicit scenes, including a rape of a policewoman (*Min Sheng Pao* 1982c; Chi 1980).

Other efforts were made in the early 1980s to confront, or circumvent, Japanese competition. The Cartoonist Association mounted clean comics movements on four occasions in 1983, drawing the attention of the education minister; and the following year, the China Times Publishing Company established a cartoon department and published its first monthly comic book, *Happy*. In 1985, the firm sponsored a *Happy* comic strip competition, which during its three years of operation enabled many young cartoonists to enter the profession.

A number of cartoonists, tired of the Japanese dominance of comic books, switched to drawing for newspapers and magazines. Their works, whether strips or political cartoons, changed the themes of cartooning from propaganda to humor and social commentary; the number of newspaper and magazine cartoonists swelled by more than a hundred between 1982 and 1984 (Dong 1985, 3). Out of that era came the top political cartoonists L. C. C. (Lo Ching-chung), Yu Fu (Lin Kuei-yu), and CoCo (Huang Yung-nan), some of whose works were in comic strip format, and prominent comic strip and comic book creators such as Chu Teh-yung (Ronald Chu), Ao Yu-hsiang, Cheng Wen, Lao Chiung, and the

already mentioned Tsai Chih-chung, who resumed his comics career.

### The Rebirth of Comics, 1985–1997

The reinvigoration of comics in Taiwan that occurred during this period was brought on by a combination of government and media actions. In 1987, martial law was lifted in Taiwan, allowing cartoonists freer expression and more creative diversity; five years later, the government passed stiff copyright regulations that sent publishers of pirated manga scampering for new ventures. In the meantime (actually, a bit earlier), the China Times Publishing Company's newspapers and magazines welcomed comic strips of various genres, which annually were collected into book form. In a short period in the late 1980s and early 1990s, China Times Publishing issued more than a hundred comic book titles, each about two hundred pages long and containing ten stories.

The implementation of the revised copyright law in June 1992 was particularly welcomed; as already stated, it curbed the piracy of manga. Affected most severely by the copyright law was the Tong Li Publishing Company and its owner, Fang Wan-nan, the self-styled "king of pirated comics" (W.-N. Fang 1992). Piracy had been extremely kind to Fang. From its beginnings in 1977, Fang's Tong Li published more than a thousand different titles.

From 1988 to 1992, the ten or more comics pirates operating in Taiwan had an agreement with Japanese distributors that was beneficial to Tong Li. The Japanese released their latest comic book list to all Taiwanese pirating publishers, who drew by chance to see which titles they received. By the terms of the agreement, Tong Li received 44 percent of all new titles, enhancing its chances of gaining the best-selling manga (W.-N. Fang 1992). Once Fang obtained a manga, he tore out the pages and distributed them to his editors, who made them suitable for a Taiwanese audience. This was accomplished by blanking out the Japanese language and replacing it with



FIG. 5.3. The inaugural issue of Tong Li's *Dragon Youth*, announcing "100%" local content at the time the Taiwanese government was cracking down on piracy, the backbone of Tong Li's business. July 1992. Courtesy of Fang Wan-nan.

Chinese, drawing bras on bare-breasted women characters, and otherwise modifying explicitly sexual or violent panels (observed by the author, July 10, 1992).

Although the pirating of manga was no doubt very lucrative, the major publishers Tong Li and Cheng-Duang claimed that there were shortcomings, most notably the "hijacking" of their comics by wholesalers and retailers. Because these companies had been operating illegally, their distribution was not protected. Many retail stores and wholesalers photocopied the comics Tong Li and Cheng-Duang brought out and sold them as their own products (Hong 2007).

Fang (1992) said that he stopped pirating "to respect intellectual property rights." However, he continued to publish popular manga under licenses with a number of Japanese publishers such as Kodansha, Jueisha, Hakusensha, and Enix (Tong Li Publishing Company 1995, 11–20). The Japanese publishers received a royalty



FIG. 5.4. Ao Yu-hsiang (left) of *Muddled Monastery* fame with fellow comic artist Hsiao Yen-chung. Taipei, July 10, 1992. Photo by John A. Lent.

fee of 8 percent of sales price from Tong Li and other Taiwanese firms publishing manga. Fang also published domestic titles, inaugurating *Dragon Youth* (for boys, with eight science fiction, campus life, and adventure stories) and *Star Lass* (for girls, with romance stories) both in July 1992, immediately after the copyright law came into effect. Fang encouraged local comics by setting up training programs, awards ceremonies, and other professional activities.

The space allocated for comic strips in newspapers and magazines (especially those of China Times Publishing) certainly gave hope and, in some cases, fortune to Taiwan's cartoonists. Early among the strips were *Pi Pi* in *Min Sheng Pao* (1980) and *Muddled Monastery* in the *China Times* (1982), both created by Ao Yu-hsiang, who went on to publish hundreds of comic books and to found Yu-hsiang Press in 1997, specializing in comic books for early childhood education. Winnie





FIG. 5.5. Chu Teh-yung's popular comics characters from *Double-Sound Crackers* and *Wayward Lovers*. Courtesy of *Free China Review*, January 1992: 24.

Chang (1992, 9) said that *Muddled Monastery* “brought together a group of weirdos and misfits, including two wacky Buddhist masters and their pumpkin-headed disciples. Set in traditional China, the strip combined light humor, Chinese Kung Fu, and supernatural powers in a concentrated battle against evil powers.” Based on the popularity of these humorous strips, editors recognized that local comics artists could attract audiences, and some did.

One of the most successful and wealthiest strip artists coming out of the 1980s is Chu Teh-yung (Ronald Chu), responsible for *Double-Sound Crackers* (*Shuang Hsiang Pao*), the funny story of a quarrelsome couple in their sixties, and *Wayward Lovers*, a lampoon of Taiwan’s unmarried “yuppies” in their twenties and thirties, uncommitted to a single lover or job. *Double-Sound Crackers* first appeared in the *China Times* in 1985; by the 1990s, Chu had turned the strip into a comic book, which sold a phenomenal four hundred thousand copies. Other editions followed. The humor in this strip is often slapstick (at times reminiscent of Reg Smythe’s *Andy Capp*) and “defensive and downright mean” (Leu 1992, 24). In one strip, a female protagonist rewards her male companion with drink. “You are the gentlest

woman,’ he says, and she pours him a drink. ‘You are the sexiest,’ and he gets yet another drink. Glasses begin to collect at his side of the table. ‘You are the prettiest,’ he says. The last panel shows the couple slumped on the table, she with hearts dancing over her head, and he happily drunk, his thoughts saying, ‘We all know what we want’” (Leu 1992, 24–25).

Chu began drawing *Double-Sound Crackers*, originally called *He and She*, while serving in the army. Leu Chien-ai (1992, 27) described Chu’s experience, relating that he “did many of them under the blanket, holding a flashlight in [his] left hand. . . . And to evade the military censors who randomly checked all of the soldiers’ incoming and outgoing mail, he would cut up the four panels, and mail them one by one to his father. It was not until he returned to Taipei in the summer of 1985 that he realized how well the strip was being received.”

*Wayward Lovers*, which launched in the *China Times* in 1989, was described by Leu (1992, 27) as a strip whose main characters are “two lovers, who continually find fault in and taunt each other. But they cannot say goodbye to the scorn-filled romance.” Chu drew other strips such as *Capitalists*, *Bitter Olive*, and *Going to the Office*. His comic books, along with those of Ao Yu-hsiang, Tsai

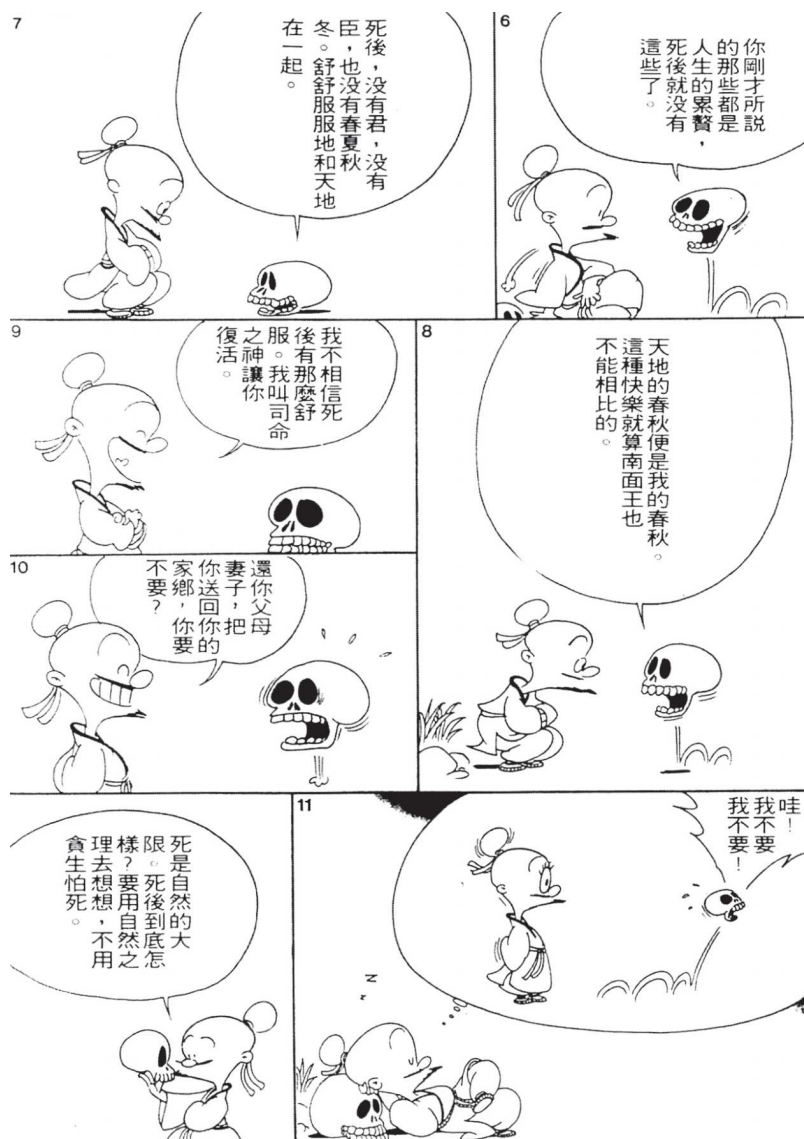


FIG. 5.6. "Zhuangzi Dreams of a Skeleton."  
*Zhuangzi Speaks*. Tsai Chih-chung. 1984.

Chih-chung, and Jimmy Liao, are favorites in mainland China. The Chinese have turned some of Chu's comic books into a television series, a stage play, and a line of household products (Yang 2007, 5) and, more recently, dedicated a museum to him and his work in Hangzhou (A. Huang 2009). Both Chu's and Tsai's original artworks have commanded huge prices at mainland Chinese auctions; Chu's *People Are Sick* sold for US\$68,988 in 2011 (see also Yang 2007, 5).

The Taiwanese cartoonist who has achieved the largest comic book readership is Tsai Chih-chung, who was among those who gave up drawing comics in the 1960s because of censorship duplicity and excessive commercialization. After a successful stint as an animator, Tsai

returned to creating newspaper comic strips, which, by 1983, had become very popular, a few examples being *The Drunken Swordsman* (*Da Zuixia*), *The Fat Dragon Crosses the River* (*Feilong Guojiang*), and *The Bald Supersleuth* (*Guangtou Shentan*). Humorous in nature, these strips were drawn with simple lines, a style Tsai continued after delving into historical and philosophical topics. His newfound interests developed while he was on a flight to Japan to sell a plan to illustrate Chinese history in comics form, when he "became engrossed in a book he had picked up to read and the grand plan shifted. The book was *Zhuangzi*, one of the classics of ancient Chinese Daoist thought. Tsai was so immensely absorbed with the ideas in *Zhuangzi* that he spent most

of his stay in Japan drawing the book" (Wei 2001a, 153–54).

In 1984, Tsai's comic book *The Music of Nature, Zhuangzi Speaks* (*Ziran de Xiaosheng Zhuangzi Shuo*) appeared; within eight years, it had gone through 114 printings. Other whimsical treatments of the sayings of the philosophers Laozi, Mencius, and Confucius were published in the late 1980s, first as newspaper strips and then collected into books. Within a decade, Tsai's books had sold more than thirty million copies. Later, Tsai branched out into history and even economics, all the time boiling great ideas and events into simple images with humorous twists. Steven Mufson (1998, A18) gave this example:

In Tsai's boiled-down version of "Romance of the Three Kingdoms," a 14th-century novel about the political maneuvering of ambitious rulers as they fight for supremacy in China, the cartoonist inserts modern references and humor. One warrior waves an Iraqi flag, a satellite dish is fixed on top of an ancient Chinese building, and court officials play mah-jongg or munch beef noodles. Certain lines uttered by characters in the classic have been edited to echo the words of the late Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong. A depraved nobleman is shown reading Playboy magazines, and a Taiwanese TV cameraman makes a cameo appearance.

Tsai's efforts to take philosophical and historical classics off dusty library shelves and insert them into popular culture have continued. Released in about three dozen countries, his books have been praised by philosophy scholars and used as teaching materials in many schools and universities. As Ku Pi-ling (2000, 37) asserted: "The renaissance of Chinese canonical works, their removal from the schoolroom to the neon-lit boulevards of modern Taipei and Beijing, is the work of one man: the Taiwanese cartoonist Tsai Chih Chung."

The rejuvenation of comics in the early 1990s yielded other comic strips and comic books that broke new ground. Lao Chiung, for example, introduced topics

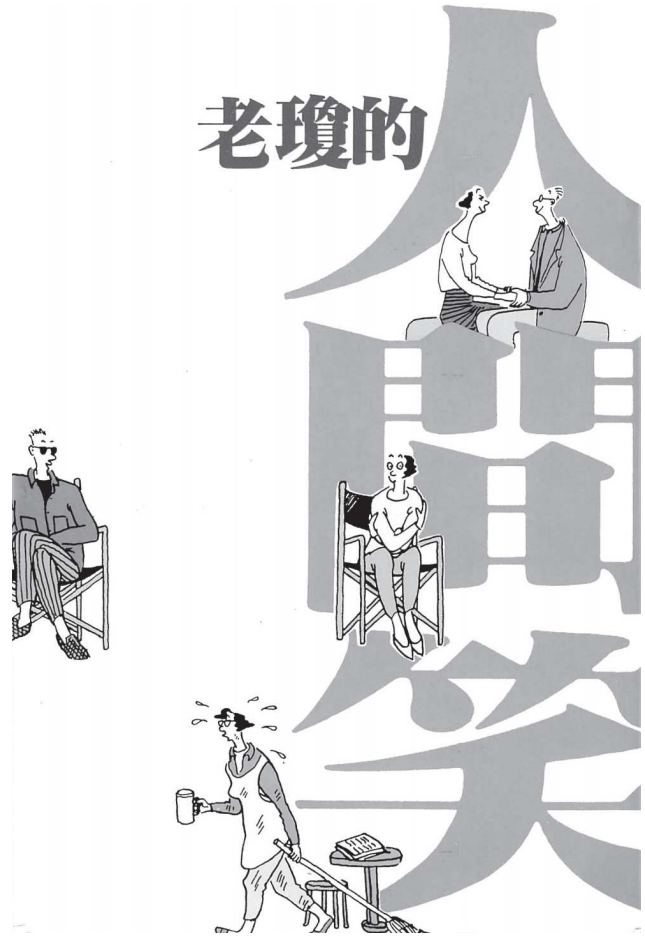


FIG. 5.7. A compilation of Lao Chiung's witty strip *Tamen* (Them). 1992. Courtesy of Lao Chiung.

such as homosexuality, premarital sex, and adultery in her witty strip *Tamen* (Them). Lao (1992) described her comics as attempts "to balance relationships between genders and to bring out ridiculous things about men and women." Beginning her career in 1983 at the *United Daily News*, she claimed to be Taiwan's first woman cartoonist. However, that honor more realistically belongs to Ye Li-yun, who, as a teenager in the 1960s, worked as a comics artist at Wen Chang Publishing House. Ye (2005) said of her start in comics:

I made my living from cartooning. I drew traditional Chinese folklore stories. Our [Wen Chang] works were more popular here than manga. I was fourteen to sixteen years old then. My wages were more than my teachers'. At sixteen, I had already drawn a lot of comics. I was full of energy and imagination. Now, younger cartoonists imitate with enthusiasm.



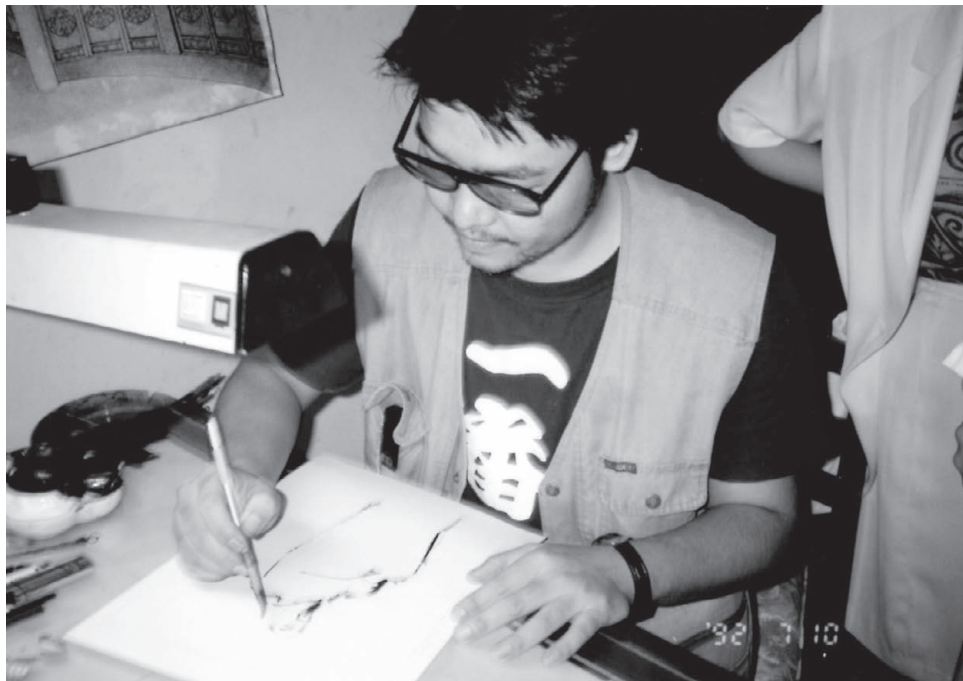


**FIG. 5.8.** Cheng Wen drawing a character from *Legendary Heroes of the Chou Dynasty*. Taipei, July 10, 1992. Photo by John A. Lent.

My grandma was a famous opera singer; grandpa played drums. Then, I had a lot of stage experience. I would be invited backstage [at] puppet shows; I would invite puppet masters to cooperate with me. The master would tell me stories and show me movements, and I would draw them in my comics.

Ye stopped drawing comics after her high school graduation when Wen Chang ceased to exist because of government censorship, and because of pressure from her husband to quit.

Stronger appeal to a female audience was another characteristic of the late 1980s–early 1990s comic scene, as was the effort to find international markets. Imitating manga, some young cartoonists moved into romance comics; examples include Yu Su-lan with *Fatal Beauty*, Yung Kao with *Buddha Transform*, and Ren Jeng-hua with *Sea of Shiou Luo*. Yu's comics not only moved young girls to tears but, like Lee Wai-chun's *13-Dot Cartoon* in Hong Kong, showed them the latest fashions. Although only in her early twenties, Yu was asked by her fans for advice in everything from dealing with boyfriends to learning how to wear high heels (W. Chang 1992, 11). Another female cartoonist of the times, Lin Yu-chiung, dealt with single working women in her strip *Hsien Kang Li*.

For different reasons, other Taiwanese comics creators besides Tsai, Chu, and Ao attempted to break into

the international market. Cheng Wen, known for his “knight errant” strips and books executed in traditional Chinese water-and-ink painting, chose to work for Japanese publishers in 1989 because of Japanese readers’ acceptance of and respect for his style and because of the snail-like maturation of Taiwanese comics. He said that a cartoonist “can have a high social rank in Japan not possible in Taiwan” and that it was “easier” to hit the Japanese market than that of Taiwan (W. Cheng 1992). For example, his *Legendary Heroes of the Chou Dynasty* initially sold three hundred thousand copies in Japan, compared to twenty thousand in Taiwan. Cheng has always imbued his characters with human frailties, including the old sages, generally considered to be perfect. Other of his early works drawn from Chinese history or martial arts are *Assassins’ Tales* and *The Sword of Ah Bi*; *Profoundly Beautiful Asia* dealt with science fiction and cops and robbers (Hsieh 1992, 95; see also Liu and Peng 1991).

Other cartoonists were also impatient with the slow growth of comics in Taiwan and sought overseas work opportunities and markets. Kid Jerry (Hu Chieh-lung) began to work with U.S. comics publisher Dark Horse in 1992, obviously for a chance at fame and increased income but also because he had tired of the myopia of Taiwanese cartoonists, who lacked an international perspective and catered to an audience solely aware of

manga and Hong Kong comics (Hu 1992). The author of *Black and White Club* condemned Taiwanese publishers, including China Times Publishing, for whom he drew, for caring only about how much money a title could make, which, he said, led to much conformity as cartoonists copied profitable themes and styles. Kid Jerry gave the example of the plethora of brainstorm comics that appeared in 1992, pocket-size monthlies of distorted and sometimes ridiculous questions and answers imitative of China Times Publishing's *Nao Chin Chi Chuan Wan* (Brainstorm comics), which came out in seventeen series, each with more than a hundred thousand readers (Hu 1992; see also J. Wang 1995).

Ao Yu-hsiang (1992) agreed that the publishers' single-minded pursuit of profit was detrimental to the industry. He and fellow cartoonists Hsiao Yen-chung (1992) and Lao Chiung (1992) denounced newspaper and magazine editors who used comics as space fillers, intervened too often in cartoonists' efforts, made uninformed, arbitrary decisions, and overloaded artists with work. Lao (1992) said that large workloads forced cartoonists to draw "for survival, not art." She said: "Cartoonists have to enrich themselves to give readers good work, but with high productivity demands, they don't have time to enrich themselves."

Besides those already mentioned, other popular strips of the 1980s and 1990s were Lin Cheng-te's *Young Guns*, about a high school boy's rebellion against parental authority; Tseng Cheng-chung's *Diary of a Young Soldier*, the real-life story of a popular singer's military life; and Chen Ching-wen's *Black Leopold Warrior*. A few artists found comfortable homes for their strips in the seven comics magazines that were publishing in the early 1990s. *Weekend Comics* made Yu Su-lan popular with *Ching Kuo Yuan Ling* (Exceedingly beautiful, unhappy actress), which, when compiled into three comic books, sold twenty thousand copies each. *Weekly Comics* published Cheng Wen's *A-Pi Sword* in two series, each selling twenty thousand copies. Other magazines were the short-lived *Sunday Comics* and *Hamburger Comics*, a 224-page magazine of adventure, romance, and humor strips for a teen-adolescent audience.

In addition to more venues for cartoonists' works, the transformation of retail outlets for comic books changed the industry significantly. As in other parts of East Asia, modern comics stores began to replace rental shops, attracting female purchasers who had previously shied away from comics because of the stigma attached to rental shops. In 1994, about two hundred stores in Taiwan dealt exclusively with comics. China Times Publishing began a chain of comic book stores (called Comics) that year, with the goal "to make Comics stores a part of people's daily lives, just like the 7-Elevens and other convenience stores that are located on every street corner" (D. Lin 1994, 5).

Support for comics ushered forth from both government and professional organizations during this period of rejuvenation. The NICT, previously the object of cartoonists' scorn, aided in a variety of ways: establishing workshops, publishing cartoons/comics as illustrative material in government books and reports, sponsoring "excellent comic books" competitions, developing strategies to encourage new talent, and hiring cartoonists to draw comic books for use in schools. Other encouragement was provided by professional and amateur cartoonist groups, notably the Cartoonist Association of the Republic of China.

From 1995 to 1997, Taiwanese comics publishers got their payoff when the market expanded and the number of local comics artists increased exponentially. In 1996, comics sales represented 40 percent of all books printed, and total monthly sales of comic books reached 3.5 million copies. With a pass-on circulation higher than other print media, comic books were the most widely read literature among children (H.-W. Hsiao 2002).

## Contemporary Comics

After 1997, Taiwan followed the global trend and entered a comics publishing slump. In the waning years of the century, comic book sales in Taiwan dropped by 60 percent; half of all comic book specialty stores closed, and three of the seven publishers folded. The

remaining publishers reduced their staffs and print runs and, in some cases, veered into online design or printing educational materials (Liao 2005). The largest publisher, Tong Li, with ten comic book titles annually, had suffered significant yearly losses by 2005 (S. Li 2005). Comics periodicals experienced a similar fate, reduced from twenty-nine that published monthly or twice monthly in 2000 to just a “handful” five years later (S. Li 2005).

Largely responsible for the shrinkage of the comics industry were the introduction of new technologies (the Internet, cell phones, online games) that seduced many youngsters (S. Li 2005), an economic recession and the transfer of big comics-related projects for production in China (Liao 2005), Taiwanese cartoonists’ preference to work for Japanese publishers (Zhong 2005), an unclear definition of the market (Hong 2005), and the retirement of the older generation of cartoonists (Ye 2005).

Discussing the undefined Taiwanese comics market, cartoonist/historian/educator Hong Der-lin (2005) explained:

There are some good works but it is hard to be successful because U.S. and Japanese comics occupy the market. Businessmen don’t dare to invest in comics and animation, because they think they will lose money. Japanese publishers can get money from toys and animation, and everyone can benefit. But, in Taiwan, there is not an established market for that type of activity. Taiwanese artists have taken their comics to exhibitions in Frankfurt and San Diego where they sold some copyrights, but they were not very successful. Also one or two Taiwanese comic book artists were chosen by U.S. comics houses to work, but they did not finish their tasks.

Ye Li-yun (2005) lamented that she gave up a career she had planned to pursue all her life, because “[m]y generation [1960s–1970s] cannot compete with the youth in doing comics. We do traditional stories; the young combine Taiwanese stories with foreign comics. They are fast and they know their own stories. So, the older generation withdrew from doing comics between



FIG. 5.9. The Japanese-influenced *Origami Fighters*, a far-fetched account of folded paper with the powers of a genie.

1966 and 1986, leaving a gap. I had to give up as a comics artist because I could not survive.”

Japanese manga has dominated sales in Taiwan to the present day, but, compared to 1996, manga’s market share has dropped by about 40 percent. In 2001, the Comic Artist Labor Union estimated the number of new Japanese comics licensed yearly in Taiwan as 220, each circulating six thousand to ten thousand copies. Tong Li still leads in the importation of manga, restructuring after 2004 to emphasize more shōjō manga when Da-Zen (previously the largest girls’ comics publisher in Taiwan) folded. The impact of manga continues to pervade all aspects of the Taiwanese scene: local comics content is highly imitative of manga, and a number of Taiwanese cartoonists work for Japanese publishers.

Japanese influence on local cartoonists is evident in many Taiwanese comic books, a few examples being *Origami Fighters* (twenty-two books) and its sequel, *Origami Fighter Generation*, both of which found success throughout East and Southeast Asia. Pat Gao (2006, 50) provided a brief synopsis of *Origami Fighters*: “The story begins with four kids who come across several pieces of paper and a book showing ways to fold the paper into different shapes. The paper-like material turns out to



be an ancient hi-tech gadget covered with electronic circuits all over it. When folded properly, the paper-thin metal turns into a genie with magical powers. The paper folders then bond with the genie to become fighting units clad in origami armor that take on endless evil.” Created by Jhou Sian-zong in 2002, *Origami Fighters* and its sequel exemplify the interest Taiwanese cartoonists take in fantasy, ghost, and martial arts genres, as well as the manga artistic style (Lent and Shiau 2008, 724, 727).

While most Taiwanese publishers and comics artists concede the impact of Japanese comics, especially through their emphasis on playwriting, editing, and, most importantly, creativity, two viewpoints regarding the impact of the popularity of Japanese comic books on local creation collide. Some local comics artists, researchers, and educators do not see any significant difference between Taiwanese and Japanese cartooning in cultural terms. The differences to them derive from the process of production, intermediated by factors such as market size and how the division of labor is arranged. On the opposite side of the spectrum, others believe that indigenous culture has been overshadowed by the dominance of Japanese comic books in Taiwan. These local culture campaigners advocate indigenous production of Taiwanese comic art, proclaiming that these art works would help local Taiwanese reflect on their cultural existence independent of foreign control. They believe local cartooning to be more educational and beneficial than imports, and in this context they call for cultural revitalization events honoring local comics artists (Lent and Shiau 2008, 727).

One difference that both camps acknowledge is that manga is more sexually explicit than Taiwanese comic books, and that there is no locally developed comics form that corresponds to manga.<sup>3</sup> Another cultural value that manga conveys is obsessive perfection, sometimes pathological and suicidal. In contrast, Taiwanese comics “stress the importance of ‘floating with the flow’ and ‘surviving adverse conditions.’ Given this, an archetypically Taiwanese comics hero is usually not extremely smart, intelligent, or skilled at a top-tier level. Instead, the ‘nobody’ who has a good sense of humor and

survives well in hard times tends to be celebrated” (Lent and Shiau 2008, 729).

Besides its influence on the content and artistic style of Taiwanese comics, the manga industry also changed how and for whom some Taiwanese cartoonists work. After Cheng Wen’s breakthrough, a number of Taiwanese cartoonists found employment in Tokyo manga firms, particularly in the monthly comics magazines. One such cartoonist, Zhong Meng-shun, explained the differences between drawing for Japanese comics companies and those in Taiwan. Zhong (2005) said: “The Japanese write their stories, find a translator, and I draw the comics based on their ideas. For Taiwanese books, the publisher gives ideas and I have ideas.”

The comics business recession of the late 1990s harshly challenged Taiwanese cartoonists in particular. One explanation for this is that local cartoonists are more expensive to hire; they receive a cash advance for drawing the first copy, which cartoon artists usually do not receive from Japanese comics publishers. Thus, Taiwanese publishers prefer not to hire local cartoonists, especially during trying times. Also, Japanese comic books sell better. The annual gross revenue for Japanese comic books in Taiwan in the late 2000s was NT\$2.1 billion (US\$70 million). For publishers of Taiwanese comics to break even, they must sell two thousand copies of each new issue. By contrast, a successful hit that is exclusively Japanese can easily sell ten thousand copies. Because fewer local cartoonists can exceed the two-thousand-copy break-even threshold, Taiwanese publishers claim to have suffered severely since the turn of the twenty-first century for publishing their works. To offset such losses, the publishers, since 2002, have relied heavily on government subsidies.

The Internet, although of benefit to Taiwanese comic artists, has also contributed to a dismal labor situation, according to a survey conducted by Liu Chang-de. Liu (2006) found that the “introduction of ICTs [information and communication technologies] has negatively influenced the artists’ works, as well as their labor process.” From what interviewees told him, Liu (2006, 459–62) concluded:

The extremely rapid speed and unlimited space of the Internet have resulted in not only an intensification of pressure [on cartoonists] but also an increase in workload of these artistic workers. . . . This rush to present “immature” productions on the Internet has undermined the quality of the artistic work. . . . In addition, cartoonists/illustrators have had to face the ever-increasing cost of new equipment due to the rapid development of ICTs. . . . The Internet also provides freelance cartoonists a convenient channel to promote themselves to newspaper editors. . . . Consequently, the size of the “reserve army” of freelance writers and cartoonists has expanded as channels for publishers and editors to find new stars have increased. Such an increase in new artists may possibly worsen the working conditions of existing writers and cartoonists—their average salary and job opportunities could be corroded because of the introduction of the Internet.

Indigenous comic artists, adversely affected by such working conditions, have received some aid from collective movements of nongovernmental and comics-related groups, as well as from government agencies. For example, the Comic Artist Labor Union has held annual competitions to select local amateur cartoonists, whose work Tong Li must publish through an agreement with the government. The winning amateur cartoonists initially contribute about twenty pages to Tong Li’s government-subsidized monthly magazines. Subsequently, two sequential issues under an independent title are published. While the first two issues are guaranteed publication, the number of issues a comic artist can further publish is contingent on sales. Other professional groups have offered support, among them the Taipei Comic Publishers Association and the Taiwan Comic Arts Research Association. Since 2000, the Taiwanese government has helped prop up the comics industry by granting subsidies, acknowledging cartoonists’ work, establishing a cartoon library, and using comics in educational and other endeavors.

The Government Information Office (GIO), responsible for the supervision of the publishing industry (including comic books), has subsidized local publishers

who carry indigenous cartoonists’ works, as well as the comics magazines *Dragon Youth* and *Cartoon Creation Record* and the Golden Cup award for cartoonists. An agency Hong Der-lin (2005) called the “government news bureau for film, animation, and cartooning” has given annual grants totaling NT\$10 million for comic book development. Ten cartoonists each receive NT\$500,000 to finish their books; the other half of the allocation funds the Golden Elephant, a program of awards granted since 2002 in the fields of comics, cartoons, animation, and illustrations.

The Council of Cultural Affairs and the Education Department have been additional income sources. Under their financial support, a number of projects have been executed to preserve indigenous Taiwanese culture, to strengthen social networks among local communities, and to celebrate differences in the increasingly diverse Taiwanese society. Support for such projects comes not only from the central government but from a wide range of local government departments. Under the broad banner of public communication campaigns, support is granted for comics pamphlets relating to tourism, community development, and education. Also, local governments have explored the development of cartooning museums to attract tourists, most of whom are Japanese, who are already very familiar with comics. Also, some authorities believe that comics can be an effective medium for transforming local historical facts into vivid stories to which tourists can relate. Overlapping these initiatives are education-related comic books, increasingly financed by local education bureaus to introduce indigenous Taiwanese stories and folktales. Promoted as an innovative educational application of Taiwanese comics, the Creative Comic Collection was launched in 2009 by the Taiwan E-learning and Digital Archives Program under Academia Sinica, the country’s chief research institution. Under this project, Academia Sinica selects archived topical materials to be story material and then chooses local comic artists to create attractive comics to be published as quarterly collections. The aim is to “present staid history in a lively, entertaining manner to reach young readers” (Ma 2011).



**FIG. 5.10.** Hong Der-lin (far right) in his apartment library crammed with thousands of comic books. Taipei, July 9, 1992. Photo by John A. Lent.

Another government initiative to stimulate interest in comics is the Taipei Cartoon Library, started in 1998 and funded by the municipal government. The library, located at the Taipei Municipal Library, houses about sixty thousand comic books on three floors and is designed for children and other comics fans. Archivist Li Ying-hao (2005) said that forty thousand of the books are early Taiwanese titles; 80 percent of the remaining twenty thousand are Japanese manga. He said that at any given moment, there are two hundred readers in the library.

Initially, some circles criticized the substantial number of Japanese comics in the collection, but, over the years, this problem has been remedied (L. Chang 1998, 4). Other libraries have begun to recognize comics as renowned cartoonists donate their works. In 2010, the National Central Library opened a new reading section for comic books (about ten thousand volumes, 90 percent of which are manga), a landmark event because, previously, the library had been restricted by policy from putting comic books on open shelves.

Playing a major role in collecting and preserving comic books in Taiwan has been Hong Der-lin, cartoonist, author of the first books on the country's cartooning, and host of radio and television shows related to comics. For years, Hong's apartment has been weighed down by tens of thousands of comic books, despite the fact that

he has donated twenty thousand to Danjiang University's Picture Materials Research Center and ten thousand to the National Transportation University's Cartoon Research Center. Hong has been the driving force in establishing cartoon research centers and museums in Taiwan (Hong 2005).

Other comics-related activities such as exhibitions, comics festivals, and associations have been funded by private business. Li Shan (2005) said that publishing houses set up the first comics festival in 1995 in an effort to sell their books; the Asian Cartoon Forum was established in 1999 by a businessman who, shortly thereafter, also started a cartoon association. Hong (2005) said that the entrepreneur did not invite cartoonists to join, his sole purpose being to use the association as a business venture. He added that others of the five cartooning associations in Taiwan were also business-designed projects. The first festival, mentioned above, became an annual event in 2004, attracting about half a million visitors to its six-day show. More than 90 percent of all exhibits feature Japanese manga (M. Chen 2008, 8).

While these attempts to professionalize the industry were occurring, cartoonists looked for ways to survive in the often depressed environment. Most worked a second job; some changed their career paths (including working as a security guard or salesman), but many others continued in comics-related fields, attempting





FIG. 5.11. Cover of Jimmy's *Turn Left, Turn Right*, which became the subject of a movie. 2001.

to incorporate their comics interest into their full-time jobs (e.g., computer graphics, visual design, or illustration). The latter were inspired by the career of Jimmy (Fubin Liao), a children's book illustrator who has spurred the development of Taiwanese graphic novels since 2000. Jimmy, known for telling tales that use surrealistic pictures and scant verbal description, moved quickly to capitalize on, and to market, his style as a brand. Through authorizing his work for use on cell phones, stationery, and apparel and allowing it to be adapted to the stage and television, Jimmy expanded his comics/illustrating business quickly. In 2002, his popularity evolved into "Jimmy's phenomenon," in which his illustrated story *Turn Left, Turn Right* was adapted into a feature film. *Turn Left, Turn Right* tells the romantic story of a lonely man and woman who never knew that they were neighbors because each turned in a different direction when exiting their apartment building. At one time, there were even plans to establish a Jimmy store to sell merchandise spun from his books (Hong 2005).

Cartoonists who stick with the profession struggle to break away from the manga style while still appealing to local readers, often by appropriating local street talk, festivities, and folklore not available in manga. In this scenario, fantasy is often synonymous with unstructured and improvised stories in which a narrator may take parts from many sources and mix them in a nonlinear fashion (Lent and Shiau 2008, 725).

Government agencies and professional associations have not broken faith with the comics industry, although they have failed to provide much financial help. In 2003, the Government Information Office and the Chinese Comic Publishers Association jointly organized the Graphic Novel Awards in recognition of this emerging artistic genre. Ten awards of US\$15,500 are given to the authors of book-length (120 pages or more) works. In recent years, the Taiwanese graphic novel has gradually developed its own style, despite many award-winning artists admitting that they were inspired by Japanese comics masterpieces. The Graphic Novel Awards were

succeeded by the Golden Comic Awards in 2010 (W.-C. Wang 2010, 70).

The Chinese Comic Publishers Association, composed of seventy publishers and distributors, has been especially active in trying to resurrect the local industry, labeling 2010 as the “first year of Taiwan’s comic renaissance” during which domestic and foreign trade shows were to be promoted, publishing deals completed, and Taiwanese comics made more visible in local bookstores (W.-C. Wang 2010, 70).

Although a few Taiwanese cartoonists have exhibited at international festivals in the past, in 2011 eleven artists were invited to represent Taiwan as the theme country at the International Festival of the Comic Strip in Chambéry, France, and the following year twenty Taiwanese comic artists showed their works at a special exhibition at the Angoulême International Comics Festival, also in France (Ma 2001).

All of this happened as Taiwan’s comics magazines downgraded from weekly to monthly and then to bimonthly schedules, as fewer daily newspapers carried any comic strips, and as manga’s dominance of the market, although diminished, still prevailed. Dark as this picture appears, positive views about the future of Taiwanese comics surface from time to time, such as that by cartoonist Lee Pei (2005), who said that “though comics are silent these days, they have potential in Taiwan and will never disappear as long as there is talent and a good intellectual and cultural milieu.”

### Notes

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2. In 2010, Liu donated 180 of his original artworks and manuscripts to the National Museum of Taiwan History.

3. Depictions of sexuality, with slightly risqué drawings and word balloons, have appeared in Taiwan, but these have not been as open and explicit as manga. As an example, cartoonist T’ung Chin-mao’s *Taiwan Times Daily* strips regularly dealt with sex topics (Phillips 1994).

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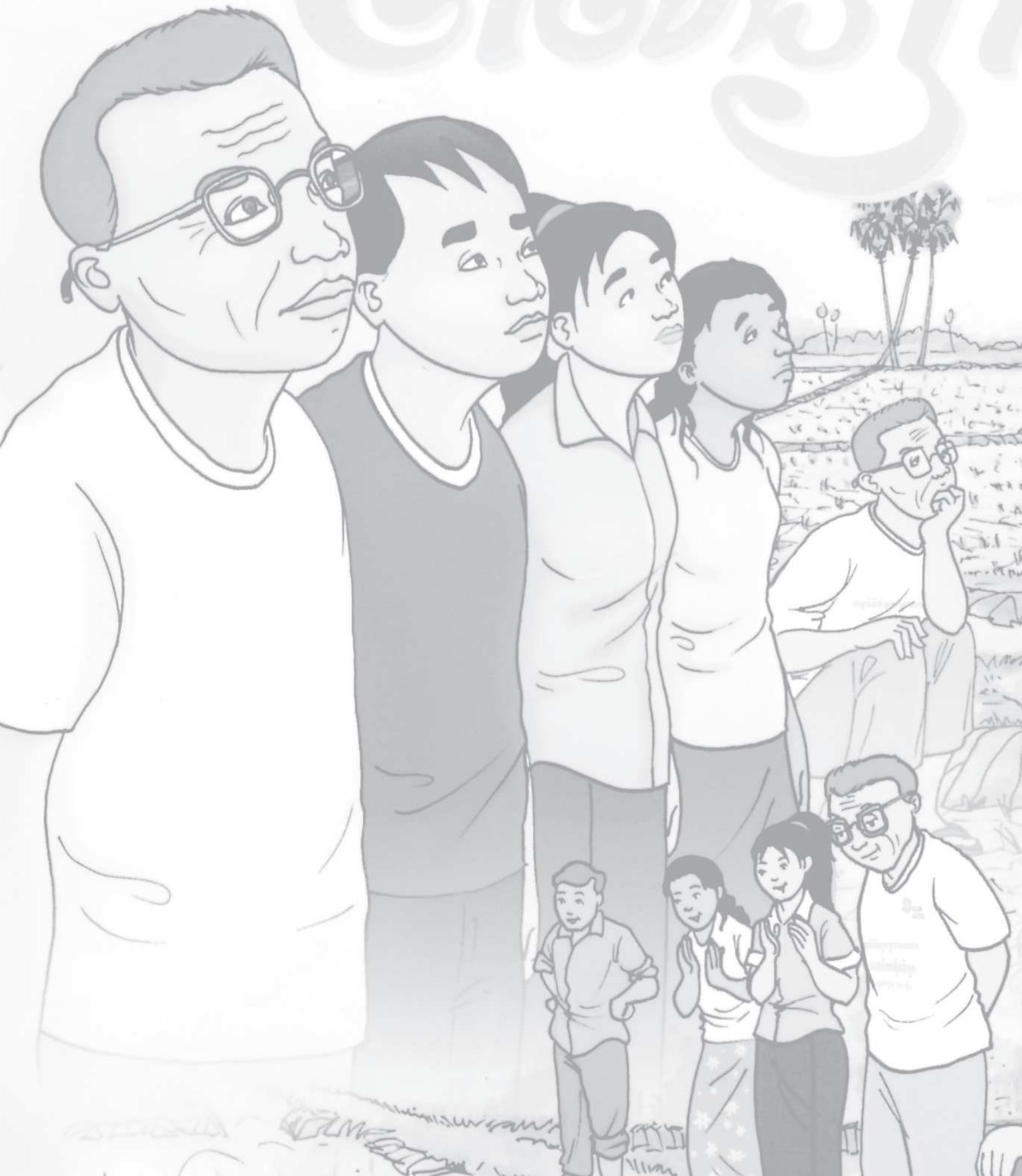
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# Southeast Asia





# အိမ်ရာ





As nearly everywhere, political cartoons preceded comic books in Cambodia, having begun shortly after the birth of the first Khmer-language newspaper, *Nagara Vatta*, in 1936 (Soth and Sin 1982). Political cartoons, along with satire generally, became prominent in the 1960s in *Phseng-phseng*, *Kambuja*, and *Le Sangkum*, magazines directed by Norodom Sihanouk, who was alternately king and head of government (Marston 1997, 60). Huy Hem, Nhek Dim, and Khut Khun were the magazines' featured cartoonists; their works mingled with an array of foreign cartoons that supported Sihanouk's foreign policy, which in the 1960s diverted away from the United States. John Marston (1997, 61) said that Sihanouk's favoring of political cartoons was "a logical extension of his personal style and the character traits he identified with, such as wit, sophistication, and irreverence toward world powers. . . . The Cambodian artists' work seemed intended to convey the message that Cambodia had wit and sophistication comparable to that of other nations, just as it suggested that Sihanouk's policies were those of someone of wit and sophistication." The cartoons also served to offset American cartoons opposed to Sihanouk, a few of which were described in *Kambuja* as reminiscent of the "Nazi Propagandastaeffel between 1940 and 1945" (quoted in Marston 1997, 61). After Sihanouk was deposed in a 1970 coup, the works of Huy Hem and Nhek Dim, and political cartoons in general, no longer appeared.

During the Khmer Republic period under Lon Nol (1970–1975), cartooning thrived, with Sunday editions of *Nokor Thom* adorned with full-size front covers of satirical cartoons; their popularity led to the increased use of cartoons in other newspapers. The two most important cartoonists were Ung Bunheang for *Nokom Thom* and Hul Sophon for *Koh Sântepheap*. Ung Bunheang, still a university student, was especially adept at drawing large panoramic cartoons, while Hul Sophon rendered cartoons in a "dark and mythic style" (Marston 1997, 61). Under the Khmer Rouge regime of Pol Pot (1975–1979), cartoons ceased to exist, and indeed very few newspapers were permitted to publish.

## Chapter 6

# Cambodia

In the subsequent People's Republic of Kampuchea (1979–1989), the newspaper *Kampuchea* proved to be a haven for cartoons. The paper disseminated the government's socialist doctrine, which is understandable in that during its first months it depended on Vietnam (whose troops had defeated the Khmer Rouge and occupied the country) for printing, editorials, and general advice. Gradually, especially after 1987, *Kampuchea* became more Cambodian and more open, becoming an important training ground for future generations of journalists. It also developed a distinctive style of cartoons, drawn largely by Im Sokha, who joined the newspaper staff in 1981 and began doing satirical cartoons six years later. The bureau chief of Thailand's the *Nation*, writing in January 1990, said that "anything goes" relative to *Kampuchea's* cartoons, qualifying his statement by clarifying that none of Cambodia's six newspapers, including *Kampuchea*, ran cartoons critical of "the Cambodian leadership or their special relationship with Hanoi" and the Communist Party (Kawi 1990).

Many cartoons published in the late 1980s were drawn and submitted by readers, or were submitted as ideas from readers and then drawn by Im Sokha (see Marston 1996; Kawi 1990). Im Sokha even described himself as an "illustrator who gives form to other people's idea for hire" (Marston 1997, 62). Most *Kampuchea* cartoons in 1989, according to Kawi Chongkitthawon (1990), "stressed the disparity of the haves and have-nots, the uneven development of the cities and the rural towns, the indifference of government officials toward public problems, and chronic red tape in government offices." Marked changes occurred at *Kampuchea* under a new editorship in May 1990. Readers' cartoons or their satirical ideas were no longer used, and those of Im Sokha closely followed government policy and became more doctrinaire.

The nation remade itself yet again with constitutional reforms in 1989 and another name change, to the State of Cambodia. In 1993, subsequent to free elections monitored by the United Nations, some restrictions on freedom of expression were relaxed, resulting in the publication of independent newspapers that

included a number of political cartoons. Mark Dodd (1993) reported in July 1993 that newspaper cartoonists were having a "field day—lampooning corrupt politicians, girl-crazy U.N. peacekeepers and even the once-feared Khmer Rouge." Im Sokha freelanced for these postelection newspapers, including *Sântepheap* (Peace), in which his cartoons took up the full front and back covers. For a while, he lived in Bangkok, employed by the Khmer-language newspaper *Reasmey Kampuchea* (Cambodian rays of light). While Im was abroad, another cartoonist replaced him on *Sântepheap*, "tracing heads from Em [sic] Sokha's caricatures onto his own pictures" (Marston 1997, 69). By the mid-1990s, however, there were significantly fewer cartoons, virtually none on front pages, and newer cartoons "avoided the degree of stylized distortion which had been common in the past" (Marston 1997, 73).

Comic art in any form was nearly nonexistent in the dailies this author scrutinized during the latter part of June 2010. The dailies were very bland artistically; they did not carry domestic or foreign comic strips, or any illustrations of stories, although they all had a sufficient number of pages to accommodate cartoons.

Simultaneous with satirical cartoons, Cambodian comic books appeared in the 1960s. Uth Roeun claims to have created the first comic book in 1963, which was published a year later. He could not recall the title when interviewed by this author, but it was *Neytung Netsang*, relating the adventures of two teenage friends (Sloan 2012). Uth Roeun did identify a cartoon he created in 1964, *Preah Thoung Neang Neak*, stating: "The content was about Muslims [at a time when Sihanouk was trying to unify the country by promoting respect and acceptance of all ethnic and religious groups]. The police interrogated me, arrested me, and detained me for a day. In the process, I missed an exam at school because I did not have time to study. So, I quit my studies and drew full time. This was in 1964, June or July" (2010).

Uth Roeun recalled that his first comic book was very popular; twenty thousand copies were printed, and he was paid four thousand riel (equivalent to US\$400 at the time, or \$2,000 in 2014 dollars). He said, "I was very



**FIG. 6.1.** Uth Roeun, creator of Cambodia's first known comic books. Phnom Penh, June 2010. Photo by Xu Ying.

excited I could make two thousand riel [*sic*] on a book and spent the money on drawing supplies and books so that I could do a second or third comic" (Uth 2010).

Uth Roeun said that his early comics drawings were more realistic than "cartooney" (2010), adding that "other artists drew temples [at Angkor Wat], not comics" as he did. He claimed that Hul Sophon was the other prominent artist drawing comics in those days, but that he only drew covers. However, both did covers as well as inside pages, according to John Weeks (2010). Uth Roeun has said that he tried to create Cambodian-style

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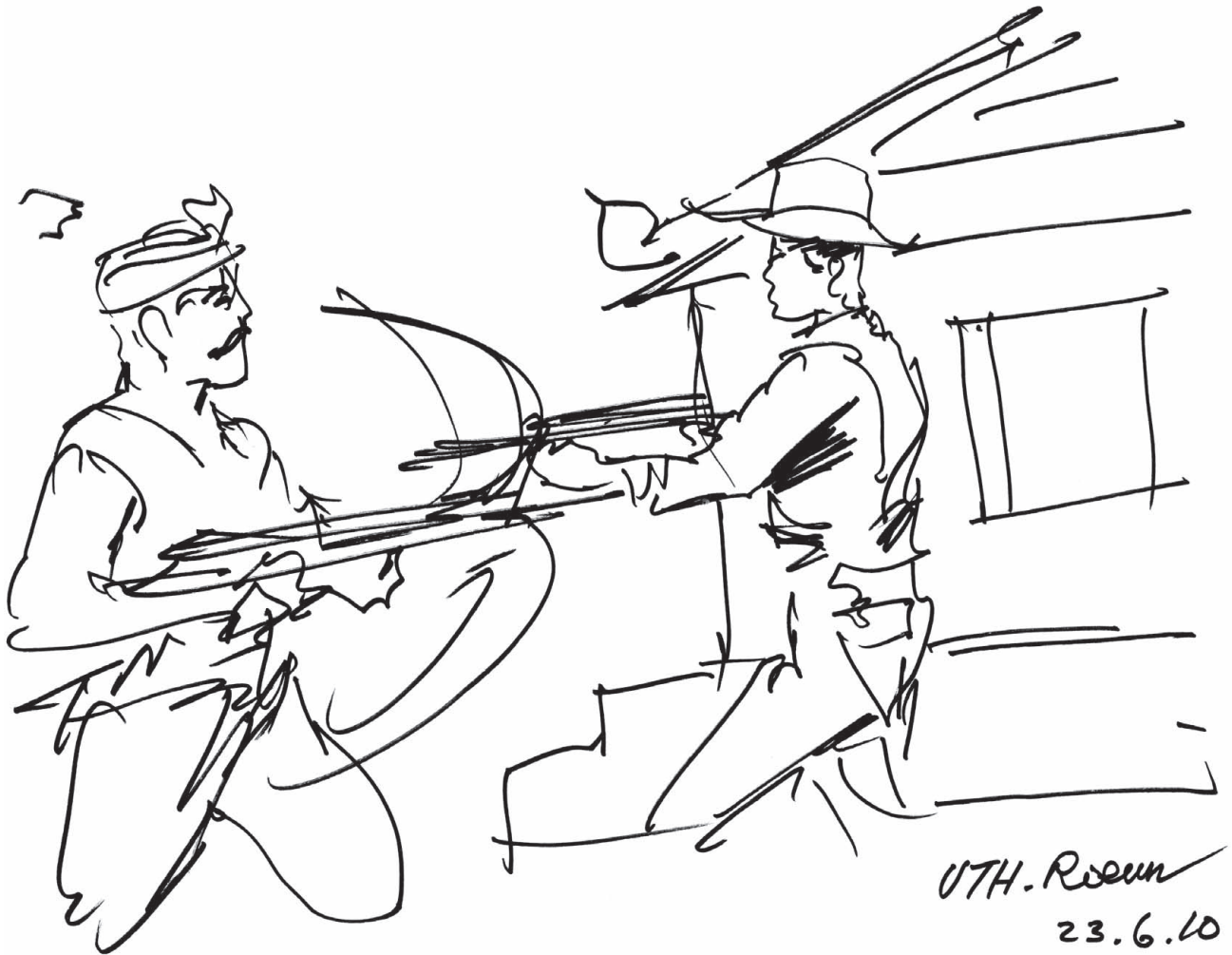


**FIG. 6.2.** Uth Roeun's example of what makes a comic panel "Cambodian." Courtesy of Uth Roeun.



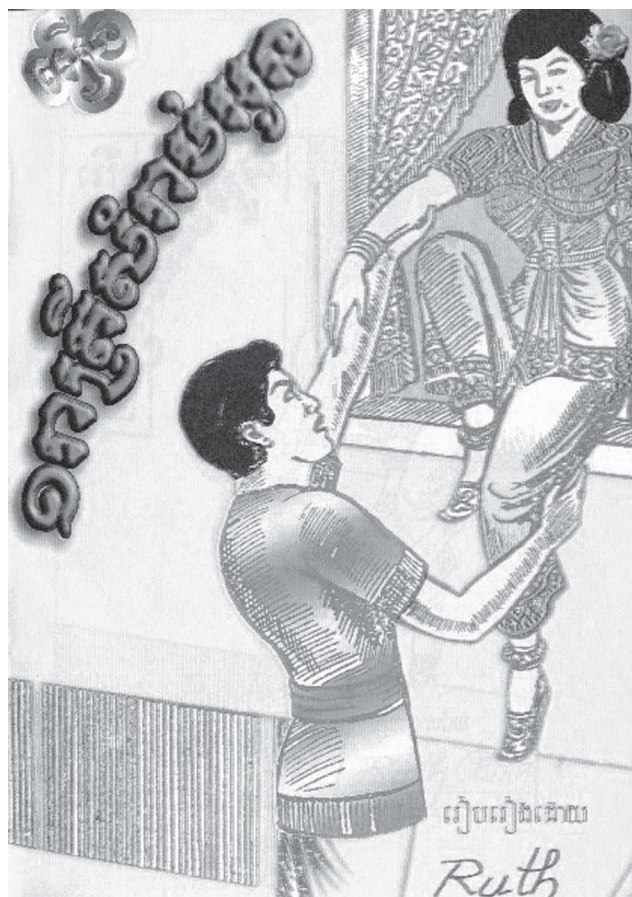


FIG. 6.3. Earliest surviving Uth Roeun title, *One Night for You*. 1966. Courtesy of Uth Roeun.

comic books, translating the “people and landscape of Cambodia into the visual language of comics” (Nguyen 2010). When this author asked him about his “Cambodian style,” he took out a sheet of paper and scrawled a Western cowboy-like figure shooting a Cambodian-garbed person, against a background of local landscape (Uth 2010). It appeared to be *bande dessinée* style converted to Cambodian by the depictions of characters, scenery, and language. In another interview (Sloan 2012), Uth Rouen indicated what he felt the contents of Cambodian comics should consist of: “If you’re young, then don’t write about sadness. Don’t write about killing and war. It doesn’t impress me; it makes me even sad because I know what the reality is like. Instead write from your heart with emotion about what you know.” Uth Roeun said that he started writing comic books



FIG. 6.4. An inside page of Chuon Ra's *Mr. Soy Visits Heaven*, an early humor comic. Courtesy of John Weeks.

simply because he wanted Cambodia to experience this medium, as he had earlier experienced it himself when he first read French *bande dessinée*.

Uth Roeun is proud to have adapted both the Cambodian folktale, *Tum Teav*, and the family drama, *Bong Proh Chet Bot* (Generous older brother), to comics format (Sloan 2012). In 2012, the government recognized him as a national living treasure.

However, he had quit drawing comics before the onset of the Khmer Rouge period in 1975, explaining:

The Khmer Rouge forced me to draw, to draw plans for them. I had been conscripted as a soldier during the Lon Nol times. I had no other choice. I was not able to draw comics then. The Pol Pot government asked me my background. I said I was an artist. The government said you are



FIG. 6.5. Sin Yang Pirom, whose novels sometimes became comic books, making her probably the first woman comics creator in Cambodia. Courtesy of John Weeks.

an artist, then you must draw. There was no money paid, just food given. I drew pictures for the Khmer Rouge. If they were building a dam, I did the drawing of it. My fingers were red from exerting myself while drawing for the Pol Pot regime. Because I had a problem with my leg, I served by drawing soldiers, Khmer Rouge plans. I was too skinny to work in the rice fields; I was very thin and could not do hard, physical work. But I could tell stories, legends, in pictures. (Uth 2010)

The earliest surviving Uth Roeun comic book is *One Night for You*, printed in 1966, one of about forty he subsequently created (Nguyen 2010). Other styles of comic books by various artists of the 1960s and early 1970s that survive and were later reprinted are adaptations of classical stories, such as the twelve-volume, uncredited *Reamker Part 5*; comedy, an example being Chuon Ra's *Mr. Soy Visits Heaven*; romance; and drama. During

the 1960s and 1970s, comics were screen printed in A5 format, with color covers and black-and-white interiors. Weeks (2011, 4) felt that, at this time, authors could make a reputation for themselves, receive credit for their work, and, perhaps for the only time in Cambodian comics history, make a living wage from drawing comics.

The Khmer Rouge era was definitely not conducive to publishing comic books. The little publishing of any sort that was done was propagandistic; artists themselves were not available, most singled out for harassment and punishment in the prevailing anti-intellectual mood. However, the socialist decade (1979–1989) yielded a number of comics, although early in that decade, producing comics or any printed materials was a challenge because resources were in short supply. In some cases, handwritten novels were rented and copied; Sin Yang Pirom wrote and illustrated her own novels, which were later adapted as comics (Weeks 2011, 6).





FIG. 6.6. A section of *Torn Chey*, adapted by Uth Roeun and published by the Ministry of Culture. 1985. Courtesy of Uth Roeun.



As the public craved more entertainment options in the latter half of the 1980s, humorous and traditional stories were increasingly told in comic books. Marston (1997, 76) remembered: "While some of these were government-produced and many have provided the prototype for the others, most were independently produced, and probably among the first independently produced publications to come out as socialism began loosening. These comic books were for sale in the markets and seemed very popular during my first visits to Cambodia in 1989 and 1990. However, I did not see them in Cambodia after 1992."

Uth Roeun helped this revival of comic books with his adaptations (published by the Ministry of Culture) of the classic *Torn Chey* (1985), the story of a boy trickster who matches wits with feudal authority; the romance *Tum Teav* (1986); and an original soldier story, *New Life in Kompong Preah* (1986). After *Torn Chey*, other artists availed themselves of Ministry of Culture financing and publication because of very limited printing facilities, including Im Sokha with the horror story *Snae Neang Klao* (Romance of the tiger lady) and Em Satya with the legend *Sovannasam*. Other creators who stood out in the 1980s were Sin Yang Pirom, who wrote romance

FIG. 6.7. Ghastly horror found its way into comic books, such as Im Sokha's *Snae Neang Klao*. 1980s. Courtesy of John Weeks.





FIG. 6.8. Song lyrics in the back of a comic book. Courtesy of John Weeks.

novels (usually in the evening after a full day's work in her commune council), and Or Yuthea, known for his romance and drama titles, one of which was *Manaet Star* (Weeks 2011, 8).

A unique genre of comic books in the 1980s and 1990s was stories based on song lyrics. Examples are *Kompong Thom Chamrong Chet* (Kompong Thom is where my heart resides) and *Lueq Srae, Choul Bar* (Sell my rice field and go to the bar). In each case, the comic book's plot was based on a popular song of the same title; a lyrics page was included. For example, one comic book ended with lyrics by Sinn Sisamouth, the "Elvis of Cambodia" (Weeks 2010).

All 1980s comics were noncontroversial, even omitting mythic and religious imagery as proscribed by the government. Weeks (2011, 8) described the comics as "escapist . . . , depicting fashions unavailable in local stores as well as lifestyles and situations often well beyond the average income." As for production of comic

books in that era, Weeks (2011, 8–9) said: "After an initial printing, comics were often sold to a secondary printer or 'middleman' (an average price might be \$300 USD). This was generally considered to be a transfer of ownership of the work, as Cambodian copyright law was in its infancy. Some artists have disputed they ever gave up the rights to their work. Some classic comics continue to be reprinted over a decade later, often with the creator's name deleted."

The transition from a socialist to a free market economy in 1989 beckoned forth another resurgence of comics production, as the government now permitted private printing presses to operate. Soon after, new works were subordinated to "cheap, unauthorized copies from prior years" (Weeks 2011, 10); by 1993, most artists were no longer independently published, and they started other careers in illustration, painting, and sculpture. Em Satya and Im Sokha did newspaper political cartoons, Sin Yang Pirom became a merchant, and others illustrated children's books (particularly the popular *Tam Tam* and *Mom & Mab*), magazines, and textbooks. Besides the takeover by reprinted comics, other explanations given for the decline in sales were a lower literacy level and the growing popularity of television and karaoke.

Illegal reprints, usually of 1980s comic books, have prevailed. They are sold mainly in a very crowded open market in Phnom Penh, which this author visited in June 2010. Two comics stalls were situated next to each other on the second floor of the market. At the first stall, reprinted comics were sold only in bundles of what appeared to be ten to fifteen copies of an individual title; the purchase of a single copy was not possible. Weeks explained that the bundles are sold to wholesalers, who resell them in the provinces. That stall also sold children's and joke books in A5 (digest) format, as well as smaller song lyrics books. The second stall sold individual reprints at five hundred riel (about twelve and a half U.S. cents) a copy.

Reprinted comic books do not list a date of publication, and all end with the emphatically stated words "The End." Some are redrawn (even traced)



FIG. 6.9. A market stall featuring comic books, mostly reprints packaged in bundles for resale in outlying areas. Phnom Penh, June 2010. Photo by Xu Ying.

by a contemporary artist, thus making it difficult to determine the original authors. Weeks (2010) gave the example of *The Fallen Areca Flower*, which might have been drawn by Em Satya; the reprint simply lists So Sakin as translator and Chea Savann as drawer. These comic books are reprinted until the screen is almost worn out; one book, considered the Cinderella story of Cambodia, was barely legible because of a very light impression due to an overused screen. Reprint publishers normally do not have a long-term commitment to bringing out comics—"they come and go," as Weeks (2010) said.

In 2003, Cambodia passed a law forbidding pirated goods. Convicted parties can be fined up to twenty million riel (US\$5,000) and spend up to five years in prison. In 2012, the government petitioned the World Trade

Organization for a five-year extension before enforcement would take effect (see McPherson 2012).

Efforts by Westerners and the Cambodian diaspora in France helped to salvage comics production during this free market period, especially in the 2000s. Nonprofit, nongovernmental organizations, and in some cases Cambodian government agencies, have kept comics publishing alive by commissioning titles on educational and social consciousness-raising topics (HIV/AIDS, water safety, labor issues, anticorruption measures, and children's rights). Some recent titles are *Taste of Life* on health (sponsored by the BBC), *Wrath of the Phantom Army* (Heritage Watch), *The Factory Gates* on factory labor (Better Factories Project), *Life's Choices* on corruption (PACT Cambodia), and *Waiting for Promises* on commune councils (Equal Access).



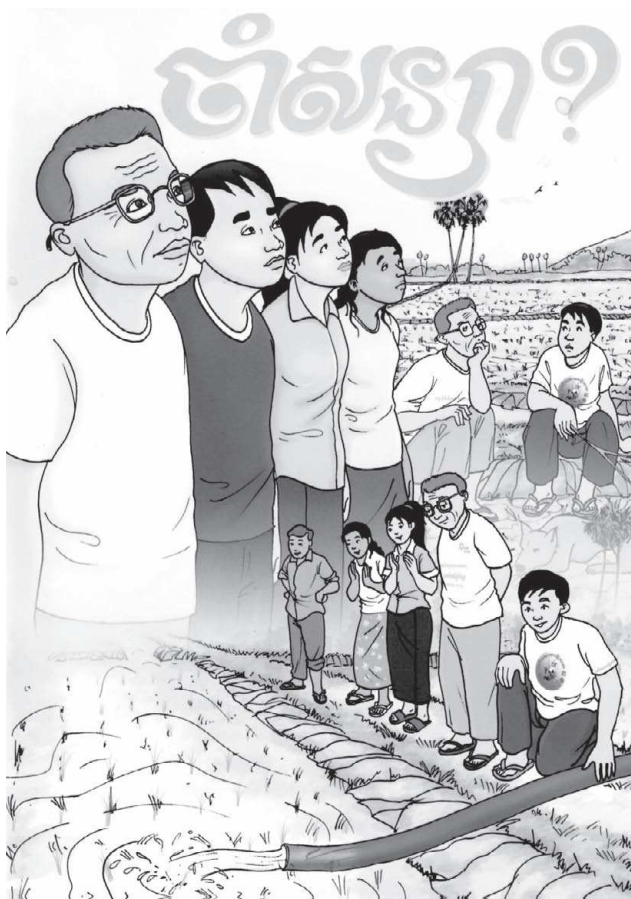


FIG. 6.10. *Waiting for Promises*, commissioned by Equal Access. Phnom Penh: Our Books, 2008. Courtesy of John Weeks.

A major publisher of outreach comics is Our Books, a Phnom Penh-based nonprofit organization with a mission to sustain Cambodian comics. Founded in 2006 by John Weeks and Lim Samgepheat, Our Books organizes workshops and exhibitions; publishes graphic novels, NGO-funded comic books, and a few reprints of old Cambodian comics; and maintains and adds to a digital archive that contained about three hundred works as of 2010. Weeks, an American who had worked at U.S. comics companies before going to Cambodia in 2000, has sought to track down and preserve old comics, interview veteran cartoonists, and make Khmer comics accessible to the world (Weeks 2010). Besides an archive, Weeks also maintains the world's only Khmer-language comics website (at [www.qdcomic.com](http://www.qdcomic.com)), which he started in 2003. He described Our Books as “sort of a design studio” operating on a “shoestring . . . like an NGO for comics.” Our Books has a pool of twenty to thirty cartoonists on whom they depend to write and

draw NGO-sponsored comics, which, Weeks said, “pay the rent.”

With his meager resources, Weeks does what he can to advance comics. He organized ComicKaze in 2009, an event where fifty cartoonists and students created a twenty-four-page comic book within twelve hours (Pham 2009), and was actively involved in the establishment of the Comic Special Interest Group in the Federation for the Development of the Book Sector in Cambodia in the mid-2000s. Members of the latter group and others formally incorporated Our Books in 2006. The role of Our Books, according to Weeks (Pham 2009), is “to facilitate, not direct. Ultimately [the local artists] are the ones to determine what emerges through the drawing sessions [such as ComicKaze]. We provide the opportunities, and the artists take one step further to give us ideas to move forward in developing Khmer comics.”

Other small comics operations and also individual cartoonists have benefited from NGO commissions. Artist Makara Soeung set up the publishing house Grand Arts with US\$800 in 1998, after which the company produced more than a hundred publications, including many comics for NGO and government agency projects (Nguyen 2010). Cartoonist Try Samphos (2010) has occasional assignments to draw small segments of books for NGO groups such as Road to Read and the French SIPAR, which ask her to draw in a style that she said is not hers.

Help for the advancement of comics has come from Séra (Phouséra Ing), a Cambodian cartoonist residing in France; Cambodian Chan Keu Tian and a team of French artists; and the Centre Culturel Français Phnom Penh. Séra created the first original Cambodian graphic novel, *Impasse et rouge* (1995), and authored other graphic novels including *Leau et la terre* (2005) that focus on the holocaust perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s. Perhaps Séra's most enduring contributions were the workshops he conducted for budding cartoonists in Phnom Penh and Battambang from 2005 to 2008. Called [Re]Générations, the workshop project emanated “from a desire to breathe life into comics in



Cambodia” (Séra, quoted in Nguyen 2010). Séra said: “I notice that the youth I meet are hungry for images and the ability to use them for self-expression. I do not impose anything big. I do nothing more than propose a framework. Then I accompany the current” (Nguyen 2010). From Séra’s workshops have come exhibitions of students’ cartoons and the publication in 2008 of *[Re]Générations: la nouvelle bande dessinée khmère*, a showcase of comics created by workshop participants from 2005 to 2007. It was the first anthology of comics in Cambodia.

In 2001, three artists from France, joined by Cambodian Chan Keu Tian, taught what might have been the country’s first comics courses at the Krousar Thmey orphanage (operated by New Family, a non-profit organization in Siem Reap). The team, including Sylvain-Mozie Rondet, Lisa Mandel, and Lucie Albon, self-published *Lakhom Kou* (Drawn theater), six volumes of comics in Khmer and English that were drawn by the students. Rondet and Mandel returned together in 2002, 2003, and 2004 to teach at Phare Ponleu Selpak, an art school in Battambang. Mandel was in Battambang again in 2005 and 2007; from those workshops, she produced other comic books of her own work and that of her students, including *Histoires de fantômes qu’on rencontre la nuit* (Phnom Penh: Tam Tam, 2005). The visiting artists earlier published reminiscences of the first workshop under the title *Sept mois au Cambodge* (Paris: Glénat, 2003).

In 2009, the Phare visual arts school in Battambang established a graphic arts studio and the publishing house Sonleuk Thmey, which salaried five Phare graduates as their illustrators and designers guided by a French graphic designer. Within a year, Sonleuk Thmey published the graphic novels *Nos coeurs* and *Au commencement*, edited by Séra, illustrated by former workshop participants Nuong Sakal and Chea Sereyroth, and funded by the French project Valéase. Mai Lynn Miller Nguyen (2010) wrote that the graphic novels featured “modern drawing techniques and bold storylines” and represented “a remarkable achievement for comics in Cambodia.”

Comics exhibitions became popular in the 2000s, in large part on the initiative of the Centre Culturel Français Phnom Penh. The first, *Bande Dessinée au Cambodge* in 2004, featured the cartoons of fifteen overseas and local Khmer artists and a forum that led to the formation of the abovementioned comics interest group. In April 2005, Séra presented illustrations from his *L’eau et la terre* at the cultural center, and two years later, again at the center, he launched his *Les lendemains de cendres* (Following days of ashes). Three other exhibitions in 2007 were *[Re]Générations* at the National Library in Phnom Penh, and exhibitions in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap to coincide with the publication of Em Satya’s *Flower of Battambang*. That same year, a local cartoonist, Nhek Sophaleap, had an exhibition of his work in Paris.

Most Cambodian cartoonists came to cartooning the hard way. Séra fled Cambodia as a teenager in 1975 when Pol Pot’s forces took over Phnom Penh; he has managed to survive financially in Paris by teaching and working as a hotel night porter (Mahr 2008). Chan Pisey left her Battambang home while in her late teens in search of work to help support her family. In Phnom Penh, she did odd jobs until she received an advertising contract in 2003 (Surewicz 2008). The mother of three children, Pisey draws when she has time, usually at night (2010). Prak Ke as a child begged on the streets of Bangkok until the police sent him back to Cambodia, where he was placed in an orphanage. Through the orphanage’s connections to a Battambang-based NGO that operates three art schools, sixteen-year-old Prak Ke was able to enroll in Phare’s art school (Nguyen 2010). Try Samphos loved drawing as a child, but her parents steered her away from an art career, fearing that she could not make a living. After receiving a degree in management, she sharpened her artistic skills by attending workshops and has since become a graphic designer and comics artist and the author/illustrator of six self-published children’s books, one in comics style.

The future of Cambodian comic art is questionable. Many economic and cultural problems plague the industry, such as the lack of a readership and market

for comics, insufficient venues for training (Nhek 2010), a flattened popular culture thanks to the popularity of karaoke, television, and video (Weeks 2010), and widespread piracy. Comic books have been spared government censorship, but, judging from their scarcity, political cartoons probably have not.

Uth Roeun. 2010. Interview with John A. Lent and Xu Ying, Phnom Penh, June 23.

Weeks, John. 2010. Interview with John A. Lent and Xu Ying, Phnom Penh, June 19, 22.

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Comic art in Indonesia was robust in the 1960s and 1970s, then it almost died over the next two decades, and eventually it crawled back to life as the twenty-first century began. As in most of Southeast Asia, much of the new activity in this century has come from non-mainstream actors: individuals or small groups that handcraft their own alternative or underground comics or attach themselves to nongovernmental organizations that use comic books to promote their various causes.

Numerous reasons have been given for the rebirth of interest on the part of cartoonists and audiences, primarily the relaxation of restrictions after the Suharto regime, the hope that comic art (especially animation) would become an exportable cultural product, and the introduction of new media such as the Internet and graphic novels.

The present resurgence notwithstanding, comics in Indonesia have a proud history, with visual humor presented through *wayang kulit* (stories acted out with leather puppets) reaching back a millennium, indigenous comic strips appearing in 1931 (early for Southeast Asia), and the publication of one of the world's first self-styled graphic novels in 1962.

Wayang characters have been likened to those in comics because of their use of veiled satire (Anderson 1990, 67; Berman 2001, 24), caricature (Sudarta 1992), and good storytelling techniques (Brandon 1967, 43; Sears 1996, 282). Contemporary cartoons and comic strips, such as those by Dwi Koendoro (1992), G. M. Sudarta (1992), and Johnny Hidajat (1992), also make liberal use of wayang characters, philosophies, and stories.

## Chapter 7

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# Indonesia

### The Beginnings

Dutch-language periodicals in Indonesia printed comic strips and editorial cartoons, but they probably served the purpose Frantz Fanon (1965) gave for early media in colonized areas—to keep the colonialists in touch with civilization, “their civilization.”<sup>1</sup> *Put On* by Kho Wang Gie (aka Sopoiku) is the earliest known indigenous newspaper strip, published in 1931 in the

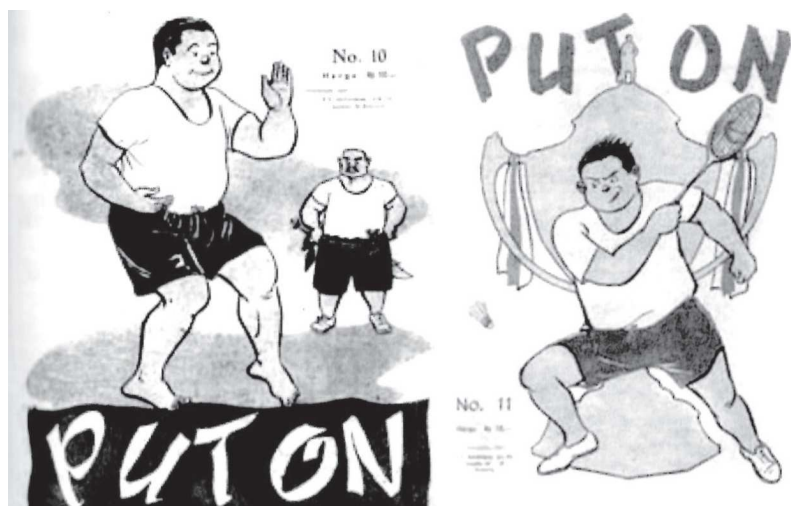


FIG. 7.1. *Put On* by Kho Wang Gie, started in 1931, is the oldest known indigenous newspaper strip in Indonesia. Nos. 10 and 11.



FIG. 7.2. *Mentjari Poeteri Hidjau*, created by Nasroen A. S. and published in *Radja Timoer* magazine, was an adventure strip started in February 1939.

Chinese-language daily *Sin Po* (Bonneff 1976, 13). A trader by profession, Kho became interested in drawing strips much in the manner that Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and other French artists learned about Japanese woodblock prints (*ukiyo-e*)—seeing them as crumpled packing paper around products sent from abroad.

*Put On's* characters and plots did not deviate far from the comic strip formula used throughout the world, reflecting the daily life of a young, single, middle-class man and the endless problems and entanglements he faced in the big city. The protagonist, named Put On, lived with his disciplined, nagging mother and two teasing brothers in a “cubicle house”; worked in an office with a difficult boss; and interacted with his sweetheart, Dortji, a sister who lived elsewhere, and his friend, A. Liuk, who usually had problems with his wife (Rizal and Elsanti 2008). Hikmat Darmawan (2009) said that *Put On* gave a “view from ‘down under’ about the roaring and razing urbanization.”

As the Dutch authorities closed down some newspapers because of their political stances, *Put On* occasionally found itself on the move, yet the strip lasted about thirty years, in the process inspiring the creation of other strips particularly in *Star Magazine* (1939–1942) (Karna 2007, 312) and in Chinese and Malay newspapers.

Through the Japanese occupation (1943–1945), the war for independence (1945–1948), and the immediate independence years, cartoons and poster art were often used for propaganda purposes, with strip characters even painted on walls, alongside resistance slogans. Benedict Anderson (1978, 292), in his research, found:

Under the Occupation, cartoons and posters were widely used, but they appeared exclusively under the aegis of the military authorities. The targets of the cartoons were typically outside society—the Dutch, the British, and the Americans. During the Revolution, posters and graffiti were the most common and most popular form. Of forty newspapers and magazines I have checked from that period, only eight carried cartoons at all; even these cartoons appeared irregularly, and at rare intervals.

Doubtless part of the explanation lies in the technical problems caused by shortages and disorders of those years. But the fact that the bulk of these cartoons were printed in papers published in Dutch-occupied Jakarta, not in towns held by the Republic, suggests that the full answer lies as much in the political-cultural as in the technical realm.

As U.S. newspaper strips such as *Tarzan*, *Rip Kirby*, *The Phantom*, and *Johnny Hazard* continued to appear regularly in Indonesian dailies and weekly supplements in the late 1940s, their popularity spurred some local artists to create similar Indonesian characters, examples being clones of Superman and Flash Gordon such as Siti Gahara, Puteri Bintang, Garuda Putih, and Kapten Comet (Karna 2007, 312).

There were also local sources for comics stories. Beginning in 1952, Siau Tik Kwei (Otto Suastika) started *Sie Djin Koei*, a popular comic adaptation of a Chinese legend published in *Star Weekly*; Abdul-salam published a heroism strip in the Yogyakarta daily *Kedaulatan Rakyat*; Teguh Santosa created *Sandhora*; and the Bandung daily *Pikiran Rakyat* ran *Kisah Pendudukan Jogja*, an account of the aggression of Dutch troops in Yogyakarta, as a complete series (Karna 2007, 312). Some early strips were compiled into books. Additionally, a comics magazine, *Aneka Komiks*, included strips as early as 1954. The magazine, published by Melodi in Bandung, was used as a gauge of a strip's popularity before it would come out as a book (Gunawan 2013a).

Cartoonists who especially stood out in the 1950s were R. A. Kosasih, Oerip, Otto Suastika, and Ardisoma. Kosasih created Indonesia's first superheroine, Sri Asih, while Oerip often based his protagonists on puppet characters. Suastika was popular during this decade, particularly for his *silat* (martial arts) strip stories, which first ran in *Star Weekly* in 1954. His strips appeared for about a decade and were considered among the best in Indonesia, mainly because of their artwork. Suastika's stories were “adapted from Chinese legends, with Chinese settings and Chinese details” (Berman 2001, 19).





FIG. 7.3. The adventure comic book *Tjempaka* was created by the master cartoonist of the 1950s, R. A. Kosasih.

Comic books had arrived on the scene by the 1960s and they flourished for nearly two decades, to the extent that the 1960s and 1970s are hailed as the “golden age” of the medium in Indonesia. Laine Berman, who interviewed older Indonesians about comics during that period, recalled their descriptions of “people sitting under trees beside the huge piles of comics they had borrowed from the rental kiosk!” (Berman 2001, 20). Responsible for the boom were the blossoming of rental kiosks, which provided reading enjoyment for Indonesians who could not afford to purchase comic books, and a new emphasis on locally relevant stories, which gave the comics greater appeal. Adaptations and copies of American superheroes and other genres as well as Chinese legends still dominated, but local stories began to be revived. Publishers such as Melodi (Bandung) and Keng Po (Jakarta) along with culturally sensitive writers and educators criticized the adaptations of foreign genres, calling for an emphasis on national culture. As

a result, stories taken from wayang and folktales from Sumatra became popular comics fare.

Kosasih, introduced to European comic books in the 1940s while working as a botanical illustrator for the Dutch government’s forestry ministry, began “Indonesianizing” comic books in 1954. With his friend Tan Eng Hiong (Tatang Prawira), Kosasih developed his Sri Asih character into a thirty-two-page comic book. Although the title lasted only five issues, “its popularity launched the comic book format as a viable medium in Indonesia,” according to Surjorimba Suroto (2010, 179).

Kosasih became famous for transferring the Mahabharata and Ramayana epics from wayang to *cergam* (an amalgamation of *cerita gambar*, meaning picture tales or comics). His Mahabharata Series (Seri Mahabharata) consisted of nineteen books, all but one being a two-volume set, for a total of thirty-seven volumes. Kosasih divided the rest of the stories in the series into a whole range of new categories, some with his own spellings: *Wayang Purwah*, *Leluhur Hastina* (Hastina ancestors), *Mahabharata*, *Bharata Yudha*, *Padawa Seda* (Death of the padawa), and *Parikesit*. He also developed new characters to adapt to Islamic teachings (Sears 1996, 278).

After 1983, Kosasih concentrated on life stories of particular characters from the epics, employing his usual method of combining elements from both Javanese and Indian tellings of the stories and, at times, changing plots (Sears 1996, 276). He was criticized for more often giving Indian, rather than Sundanese or Balinese, twists to these classics; his response was that this was intentional, to prevent regionalism. Other traits of his comics were his inclusion of side messages in small frames on the pages, as if appearing on ancient parchment, and his interruption of the stories to explain differences between the Indian interpretations he was providing and those more familiar in Indonesia (Sears 1996, 275).

Sears explained that Kosasih’s move from imitating American superhero comics to retelling the Indian classics resulted from President Sukarno’s anti-West, anti-imperialist stance. In the 1960s, Sukarno accused comic book artists of subversion, calling their work garbage and Western-induced poison, not at all conducive

to building a national identity. As a result, schools and kiosks were raided and comics were confiscated and burned (Berman 2001, 20). Kosasih took heed, according to Sears (1996, 279), and “came up with the brilliant idea of recasting the beloved heroes and heroines of the shadow theatre as cartoons. He also decided to dress these heroes in the clothing of the *wayang orang* (human wayang) theatre that was flourishing at that time.”

Despite Sukarno’s and, later, Suharto’s aversion to comic books, they continued to thrive, even those copying Western prototypes. In the 1960s and 1970s, Tarzan-like characters such as Nina, Djakawana, Zanga, Mala, Tjempaka, and Wiro Si Anak Rimba (Wiro, the jungle boy) flourished, as did local superheroes such as Puteri Bintang and Garuda Putih (both by John Lo), Kapten Amad, Indra, and Sri Asih as well as space adventure stories reminiscent of Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon. Many of these stories were published by Melodi in its comics magazine *Aneka Komiks* (Gunawan 2013a).

Yogyakarta, Medan, and Bandung joined Jakarta as comic book centers during this period. Sumatra, especially Medan, spawned important artists such as Taguan Hardjo (author of *Dolores*) and Zam Nuldyn, and publishers Casso and Harris, which brought out Sumatran folktale-based comics. Many other comics artists and their titles were popular, including Hasmi and his strip *Gundala*; Teguh Santosa (*Mat Pelor*); the abovementioned Kosasih and Kho Wang Gie; the Chinese-influenced Ganes Th. (*Si Buta dari Gua Hantu* [The ogre from ghost cave]) and Hans Jaladara (*Panji Tengkorak* [Panji skull]); Mansyur Daman; Delsy Syamsunar; and Zaldy.

Zaldy was known for his romance comics, a genre that sprouted in the 1950s in comic strips, continued through the 1960s and 1970s as comic books, and abruptly faded thereafter. Between 1966 and 1971, Zaldy created sixty romance comic books, most featuring stories of unrequited love and love triangles (Darmawan 2009). Among his works were *Mawar Putih* (The white rose), *Setitik Airmata Buat Peter* (A teardrop for Peter), *Tetes Airmata Cinta* (Love teardrop), and *Impian Kemarin* (Yesterday’s dream). Jan Mintaraga was also

popular as a romance comics creator in the 1960s and 1970s, bringing out *Kabut di Hari Tjerah* (The mist on a sunny day), *Patahnja Sebuah Melankoli* (The demise of melancholy), *Tonil* (Drama), *Tertiup Bersama Angin* (Blowing in the wind), and *Tjintanya Bukan Tjinta Kanak2* (Not a child’s love).

Darmawan (2009) found repetitious elements in Indonesian romance comics of the period, including stylistic (Western) names of characters, titles derived from Western and Indonesian pop music, featured American hairstyles and miniskirts, the use of visual references (films, foreign comics, posters), fully drawn backgrounds, and urban architectural styles. Iwan Gunawan (2013a) added that some romance comics “explored stories that were too close to pornography.” Also common were characters reading newspapers or magazines, a rare sight in Indonesia until the literacy campaigns of the 1980s, for example the *Koran Masuk Desa* (Newspapers for the village) campaign (Darmawan 2009). Romance comics continue to be published to this day, but, according to Darmawan (2009), their discussions about love are theoretical, “confined in the realm of ideas, and might be trapped in mere idealizations.” He conceded that contemporary love comics are more sophisticated than those of the 1960s and 1970s, but they “fail to portray the mental complexities of their characters.” One very recent title, *Understanding Love*, Darmawan (2009) labeled a “‘love for dummies’ for teenagers.”

The borrowing from the West did not subside despite government disapproval, as evidenced in two major works by Wid NS and Jan Mintaraga. Wid’s *Godam* featured a superhero akin to Superman with the difference that Godam, being a truck driver, was more mortal, closer to the common people (Indarto 2004). Mintaraga’s equally favored *Sebuah Noda Hitam* (A black stain) featured the romance life of a teenager. Kuss Indarto (2004) said that Mintaraga’s ideal girl character imitated most Indonesian film stars of the 1970s and early 1980s, all of Indonesian European descent. His female characters have European noses, slim figures, small lips, and big round eyes.





FIG. 7.4. A 1960s romance comics story by Jan Mintaraga, who specialized in that genre.



FIG. 7.5. The chameleon-like strip *Djon Domino* by Johnny Hidajat, who daily spun off the character into different strips for a number of newspapers and magazines. Courtesy of Johnny Hidajat.

Cartoonist-cum-researcher Toni Masdiono (2008) thought that the Sukarno government may have unwittingly helped comics development in the 1960s, explaining: “After 1965, you had to ask permission from the Jakarta police to do comics. That made our cartoonists creative. Censors would blacken out art work; cartoonists would purposively put typos with hidden meanings in comics.” It must be pointed out here that some of the censorship was at the initiative of cartoonists such as Ganes, Mintaraga, and others who, in 1967, asked the police to register and censor, if necessary, their work in order to continue to be published (Gunawan 2013a). Because all comics activities were scrutinized by the authorities in the 1960s and 1970s, some comic books were “driven by a particular ideology or belief,” according to Mustaqim Karna (2007, 313). He said: “Political messages were often found in comics . . . messages such

as nationalist vision, aspirations and hopes of the nation, and religious syncretism.”

The “golden age” was important also for nurturing the early careers of a number of famous contemporary cartoonists, among them G. M. Sudarta, Johnny Hidajat, Dwi Koendoro, and Pramono. Hidajat’s career peaked during the first decade of Suharto’s New Order. Initially, he was a cartoonist for the right-wing daily *Pos Kota* and a freelance contributor to a variety of magazines, particularly *Stop*, an imitator of *Mad* magazine. From 1970 to 1975, Hidajat drew for ten magazines simultaneously. He said that this was possible because he would take a particular event or issue and comment on it in ten to fifteen strips for a variety of magazines, and because there was an abundance of magazines full of cartoons, such as *Flamboyant*, *Vista*, *Selecta*, *Detektif & Romantika*, *Stop*, and *Matahari* (Hidajat 1992). He took credit



for popularizing cartoons with text balloons, which, he said, unfortunately died out after 1985. He also lamented the loss of popular magazines by the 1990s, as well as lower payment for cartoonists. With respect to the latter, Hidajat (1992) said: “In 1975, my pay per month was 500,000 rupiah, and a motorcycle cost 125,000 rupiah. Now [1992] a motorcycle is 3 million rupiah. I could get a motorcycle in a month then; now, it would take two years on a cartoonist’s fees.”

Trying to determine the immense popularity of Hidajat’s signature strip, *Djon Domino*, Anderson (1978, 295) attributed it to good jokes, style, context, and the dominant character’s close similarity to the wayang character Petruk. Also characteristic of Hidajat’s strips is their use of obscenity and sexuality mixed with politics (Hidajat 1992). Another feature that Hidajat said brought many readers to *Djon Domino* was the inclusion of a number in the strip that people played in the lottery.

The “golden age” kept a number of magazines alive, including the humor-oriented *Stop* and *Astaga* (Good Lord). The latter lasted for twenty issues in 1975 and 1976 before succumbing to lack of funding. Chief editor Arwah Setiawan (1992) said that the magazine’s contents were equally split between cartoons and prose, some of the latter written by Setiawan himself. A humor writer since 1968, Setiawan founded and headed the organization Lembaga Humor Indonesia. He said that his major problem at *Astaga* was recruiting freelance cartoonists.

The tide changed for the worse for the comics industry from the 1980s to the mid-1990s. A number of factors contributed to the near death of Indonesian comics, chief of which was the huge influx of pirated foreign comics, first from the United States and Europe, and at decade’s end from Japan and Hong Kong. *HumOr* magazine cartoonist Mahtum (1992) said that, from 1987 onward, foreign comic books from the United States and some from France were issued usually twice monthly by publishers such as Media Pustaka, Eres, Indira, and Gramedia. The latter, Indonesia’s largest book chain, reported that, by the mid-1990s, imported comics far outsold legally produced domestic comics, with Japanese manga accounting for 90 percent of these sales.

Others weighed in with their reasons for the decline of comics, including a lack of fresh ideas with universal appeal, a shortsighted marketing strategy, the conversion of cergam rental shops to videocassette rental stores, and inadequate distribution networks. A *Jakarta Post* article of September 28, 1995, suggested that Indonesian artists were not in touch with “universal themes, concentrating on village life, the irrational and mystic, all dull and tedious.” Concerning distribution, Karna (2007, 314) said that, in the 1970s, comics were widely distributed at street markets and *taman bacaan* (small public libraries), but that they never made it to major bookstores, almost vanishing from the market by the late 1980s.

Among cartoonists, Toni Masdiono (2008) attacked the comics companies of the 1980s and 1990s for not working as an industry and for producing cheaply made comics sold at high prices. He said that the quality of some comics was so low that they were even printed on the backs of calendars. Masdiono also thought that the master cartoonists had tired of working alone on all aspects of production of boring stories borrowed, with little change, from China, and that the public considered comics to be “trash” (Masdiono 2008).

The artists’ abysmal pay, lack of royalties and legal contracts, low standard of professionalism, and limited repertoire of stories also were cited as causes of the downturn. Berman (2001, 22) added other dimensions: that the artists had to contend with a colonial mentality equating the indigenous as inferior to the foreign; and that, for decades, they could not take up “real, modern issues and contemporary concerns” because of government restrictions and societal norms. What Berman could not comprehend was why comic book legends of the recent past were not available in bookstores, and why popular newspaper strips did not make it to comic book format. She said that Javanese legends such as Jaka Tingkir, local versions of the Ramayana, and the Imperium Majapahit had been very well received in full-color serialization, published in every Javanese-language magazine and newspaper, but, as yet, they had not appeared as comic books (Berman 2001, 21).

A market that comics publishers tried to attract in the 1970s and especially the 1980s was that of the more devout Muslim community, with titles appearing about Quranic prophets, Islamic caliphs, Nasruddin Hoja, Ali Baba, Aladdin, pilgrimage to Mecca guides, and the like. Mizan has been the main publisher of Muslim comics over the years; in 1996, the company revised its strategy to meet the needs of *dakwan* (struggle) rather than satisfy commercial interests (Budiyanto 2006; see also Karna 2007, 314). Such educational/instructional comics did not compete well with foreign titles and caused concern among Muslims, some of whom felt that the comics introduced unwanted views and were a form of expensive, unappealing, verbal expression not favored for children by adults (Budiyanto 2006; see also Karna 2007, 314). Hoping to cash in on the popularity of manga in Indonesia, Mizan began converting Japanese comics icons to Islamic values, for example having Japanese favorites Doraemon and Nobita participating in a Ramadan fast. A more recent lineup of Mizan (now Dar! Mizan) titles includes *Novel Comic* and *Teenage Novel Comic*, both detective/mystery themed; *Islamic Comic*, with religious subjects; and *Devotion Comic*, oriented toward nature and science. Over the years, *cergam* have been published to appeal to Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu populations in Indonesia as well.

The slow revival of Indonesian comics commenced in the early- to mid-1990s, a result of efforts by Dr. Rahayu Hidayat, Edi Sedyawati, and Dwi Koendoro, as well as some high school and college students who coalesced in comics-producing groups. Mrs. Hidayat formed and was chief organizer of Lembaga Pengkajian Komik Indonesia (LPKI, the Indonesian Comics Studies Committee), located in the Faculty of Literature at the University of Indonesia. Communities such as the LPKI were started throughout the decade by young university lecturers, who held a couple of comics seminars before launching regular Indonesian comics exhibitions (Karna 2007, 316).

Sedyawati, general director of cultural affairs in the Department of Education and Culture, organized with government support a cultural congress that included comics and cartoonists. Koendoro's role came when

Sedyawati asked him to create a forum "to make comics nationwide and continuous" (Koendoro 2007). She also appointed Koendoro to head a comics contest jury, one result of which was the first Pekan Komik dan Animasi (Comics and Animation Week) at the National Gallery of Indonesia in 1998, featuring competitions and exhibitions. Encouraged by this week-long event, other comics contests, exhibitions, and activities sprang up in various cities, including comics discussions in cultural centers, bookshops, and private galleries. Publishers in turn devoted more of their production to local works (Karna 2007, 316).

Another outgrowth of Pekan Komik dan Animasi was the campus comics community Masyarakat Komik Indonesia (MKI), started in 1996 by Ardie of the comics studio Karpel Biru (Blue carpet). MKI, although famous, was not the first of these communities. Others from the early 1990s onward were formed on campuses and in hobbyist groups, mailing lists, and online forums. Among them are the mailing list groups Klub Komunitas Indonesia, Komik Alternatif, and Komik Indonesia; the online forums [planetmerah.com](http://planetmerah.com), [kitakita.com](http://kitakita.com), [barong-komik.com](http://barong-komik.com), and [mikon.diffy.com](http://mikon.diffy.com); and the websites [indicomik.com](http://indicomik.com), [komikindonesia.com](http://komikindonesia.com), [museumkomik.com](http://museumkomik.com) (Karna 2007, 317), [ngomik.com](http://ngomik.com), and [makko.com](http://makko.com).

Other active comics communities have been Koin, Sraten, Icon, Komik Nusantara, Animik, Bajing, Loncat, Kirikomik, Martaba Komik, Bengkel Qomik, Kimikografi, Majik, Komikita, Karpel Biru, Jokomik, and Kamikazi, the latter started in 1999 by Agung Kamikaze as a small comic addressing the independence referendum in East Timor. A year later, Kamikaze started a website for Indonesian and regional comics (Weeks 2003). Some groups and their activities were backed by the publishing houses Mizan, Gramedia Komik, and Grasindo, from which they received royalties and sometimes had the good fortune to have their characters registered (Putranto and Purwanti [2010?]). Yet, some of the "strongest" of these communities died because of economic problems, internal disagreements (Koendoro 2007), new media luring away audiences, a lack of clarity about new cultural patterns in the country's economic

and political turbulence, a “peripheral and unprofitable” position in the marketplace (Putranto and Purwanti [2010?]), expensive publishing materials necessitating the use of copy machines, and the invasion by manga and Hong Kong comics (Masdiono 2008).

Independent comics during the 1990s fell into categories of “art school” and “NGO.” The art school comic books were the most limited in accessibility and distribution. Calling them “often weird (*waton aneh*),” Berman (2001, 28) said that they had “little if any story” and leaned toward pornography. Spearheading this alternative comics movement was Athonk, a dropout from the Yogyakarta campus of the Art Institute of Indonesia, with his self-published *The Bad Times Story*. The small book’s “playful mix of the idealism of youth with biting social and political commentary” (Berman 2001, 28) was deemed illegal, as evidenced by its confiscation by police in 1994. More directly associated with the Art Institute of Indonesia was *Selingkuh* (dishonesty, deception, corruption), a “comic-cum-manual . . . entirely devoted to weighing out the pluses and minuses of deception with the ultimate goal of luring someone into sexual engagement” (Berman 2001, 29), with the pluses winning.

Among other student-originated independent comics in the 1990s was *Caroq*, produced by the group Qomik Nusantara, fourteen art students from the Bandung Institute of Technology in West Java. Although this book featured a West Javanese hero who wore Madurese clothing and fought with that ethnic group’s swords, it was still heavily criticized as an import. Other local comics such as *Patriot* and *Captain Bandung* were “harshly criticized for not being as slick and attractive as the import,” showing, according to Berman (2001, 22), the “no-win” situation in which local comics have operated.

Following the weirdness-for-its-own-sake tendency of many independent comics was the publisher Core Comics, with its first series, *Berteman dengan Anjing* (Befriending dogs), in 1996. Provocative as independent comics often are, the stories in the first three volumes spotlighted dogs, an animal vilified in a Muslim culture such as Indonesia—dogs becoming human soldier heroes, space dogs falling in love with earth women, or

dogs in their own heavens cursing and abusing people. Generally, independent comics such as those of Core Comics defied easy classification because of their varied drawing styles, story plots, and characters. Berman (2001, 30), discussing Core Comics, concluded: “The fact that nearly every story has a sad ending may be as revealing as the series can get.”

A comics community known for its innovative method of “distribution” was Apotik Komik in Yogyakarta, formed by thirteen Art Institute of Indonesia students on April 25, 1997. The group used a wide range of materials and modes of expression to do comics, aiming to make art more accessible than just being on gallery walls. Its first work was a seven-hundred-meter by two-meter mural exhibited on the wall of a student residence; its most unusual wall comic was *Sakit Berlanjut* (Sickness continues), made of corrugated paper that the students cut, pasted, and painted with India inks and then posted in various places around the city. Passersby were encouraged to take pieces of the artwork with them. Apotik Komik’s nonwall, alternative comics included *Komik Seni* (Art comic), *Komik Underground*, *Komik Ampyang* (Peanut candy comic), and *Komik Haram* (Forbidden comic). The books employed metaphors and a playful style to discuss actual sociopolitical issues, giving a “broader, more disturbing view of some aspects of Indonesian society such as its reckless government, amoral bureaucrats, poverty, religious conflict and the rise and fall of its democratic life” (Putranto and Purwanti [2010?]).

Activists, through funding from development groups, created the other independent comic books of the 1990s. These followed the pattern of their predecessors, particularly in the Philippines, India, and many parts of Africa, in that they tackled social issues and problems and stayed committed to the common people. However, most of those in Indonesia were merely translations of activist comics from abroad, with very little artistic relevance to the local scene. There were exceptions, such as *Outran-Outran ing Muria* (Chaos in Muria) in 1993, written by Brotoseno, drawn by Marto Art (students from the Art Institute of Indonesia, Yogyakarta),



and funded by an independent environmentalist group in north central Java. Anti-nuclear power in purpose, *Outran-Outran ing Muria* was launched to give villagers near the proposed site of Indonesia's first nuclear plant another side to the issue from that of the government (see Nugroho 2009a). With "good pictures and a great dialogue," and in Javanese, the comic book provided an alternative voice. Berman (2001, 32–33) had reservations about this book and activist comics more generally because she felt that they presented an idealistic, unrealistic view; followed "aggressive western trends which are often inappropriate in Indonesian contexts"; and had to contend with government interference and "dominant ideologies that train the population to dislike and distrust many of the poor their comics are attempting to defend."

Other activist comics in the 1990s were those printed in *JeJAL*, a monthly newsletter funded by an NGO to empower and educate Indonesia's very oppressed and persecuted street children to freely express themselves, usually through comic strips (Berman 2001, 33). Apparently a threat to authority, *JeJAL*'s office was raided and issues of the newsletter confiscated.

Unlike comic books, comic strips (usually humorous) remained popular in several newspapers and magazines throughout the 1990s and 2000s. In 1992, Ramli Badrudin (1992) said that at least *Jawa Pos*, *Pos Kota*, *Wawasan*, *HumOr*, *Bisnis Indonesia*, *Suara Pembaruan*, and *Suara Merdeka* contained comic strips, but Darminto M. Sudarmo (1992) pointed out that only about 14 of 240 daily and weekly newspapers in Indonesia carried strips. A few newspapers, both in their daily and Sunday editions, outperformed their Western counterparts in space allotted to, and the variety and display of, strips. An informal survey on Sunday, July 26, 1992 (conducted by the author) revealed that *Pos Kota*, in its color comics section titled "Lembergar" (an acronym for Lembaran Bergambar untuk Keluarga, or Funnies for the family), had three full pages of comics containing twenty-two different strips. Most of the strips were humor based; others were themed around adventure, jungle settings, or old Indonesian tales. *Suara Pembaruan* that day devoted nearly a full page to humor strips, drawn

simplistically by fourteen cartoonists; one title, *Santai Saja*, used five separate cartoonists, each responsible for two panels. Despite these examples of local strips, two-thirds of newspaper cartoons were still translations of foreign comics (Berman 2001, 22).

Perhaps the three oldest comic strips are G. M. Sudarta's *Oom Pasikom*, a political and social cartoon started in 1967; Johnny Hidajat's *Djon Domino* (1970), and Dwi Koendoro's *Pailul & Panji Koming* (1979).

*Oom Pasikom* attempts to make "funny news to decrease the possibility of being disturbed" (by criticism from the government or public) (Badrudin 1988, 36). Sudarta (1992) said that the philosophy behind his strip and editorial cartoons was the Indonesian way, explaining, "we want to make those in government we criticize to smile, and make people smile to bring up their aspirations. We have to make ourselves smile or we can be jailed." In 1992, *Oom Pasikom* became the first Indonesian cartoon character made into a film, *Oom Pasikom Parodi Ibu Kota*, using both live action and animation techniques.

*Djon Domino* had no social message. Hidajat (1992) elaborated: "I make him [Djon Domino] not to have a special message either as a bad or good guy. He changes regularly day to day. He can be a judge, lawyer, criminal, doctor, or bad guy." The strip appeared simultaneously in five newspapers and magazines in Jakarta and Medan, its character's name and persona changing in each: Djon Domino in *Pos Kota*, which pokes fun at Jakarta people and traditions; Djon Tik in *Waspada* of Medan; Djon Kaget in *Pos Film*, obviously about cinema; Djon Taremolneok (the Indonesian word for conglomerate spelled backward) in *HumOr*, about high-level business executives; and Si Djon in *Terbit*.

Koendoro started *Pailul & Panji Koming* after he was asked by the *Kompas* owner to join the staff as a cartoonist in 1976 and later to draw a strip about humor and politics. Berman (2001, 16) talked about the strip's identity:

The name *Panji Koming* can tell us a bit about its perspective. *Panji* is an old Javanese title for mid-ranking royalty.



FIG. 7.6. *Pailul & Panji Koming*, Dwi Koendoro's signature strip, has dealt with Indonesian social and political foibles for more than thirty years. Courtesy of Dwi Koendoro.

*Koming* means stunted or small-minded in the Javanese language. By adorning the hero with this obscure title preceding a comic given name, its creator is matching elite position with ignorance in this strip set in the past, as seen through clothing and hair styles. The hero Panji is barefoot, meaning that despite the title he is a peasant. Yet he is also someone able to show the obsequiousness expected by his betters. Status is often reflected through basic, broadly recognized symbols. The powerful wear shoes; they are fat; and they are treated with deference despite their foibles.

Koendoro (1992) said that *Pailul & Panji Koming* deals with "anything of social, political significance," but because of such themes, sometimes the strip does not pass editorial review, despite discussions with the editor beforehand. Also a filmmaker and animator, Koendoro sometimes drew the strip on location while he was filming in the jungle and in kampongs, at times under gaslight (Koendoro 2004). Koendoro drew another comic strip for *HumOr* about the Dutch East India Company

three hundred years ago, a humor/adventure comic of five pages that featured two warrior heroes who fought the Dutch company.

Notable strips in recent years have included *Mr. Bei*, *I Brewok*, *Lotif*, *Doyok*, and *Benny & Mice*. The character Mr. Bei, known for getting it wrong despite good intentions, appeared during the 1990s in the Sunday color comics section of Semarang's *Suara Merdeka*. *I Brewok*, the creation of I Wayan Gunasta (Gungun), was a political strip that appeared regularly in the Sunday edition of the *Bali Post*. *Lotif* debuted in the newspaper *Tempo* in 2005 but later found a home at the *Jakarta Globe*. The character, whose full name is Abdul Selotif, was created by freelance illustrator and animator Beng Rahadian. *Lotif* has been described as a "skinny, bug-eyed urbanite" with "naïve charm and socially conscious behavior" (Thee 2009). Over the years, *Lotif* evolved from showing the character's misadventures while trying to impress women to making "jokes out of the current issues from the point of view of the ordinary, sometimes forgettable person" (*Jakarta Globe*, March 10, 2010).



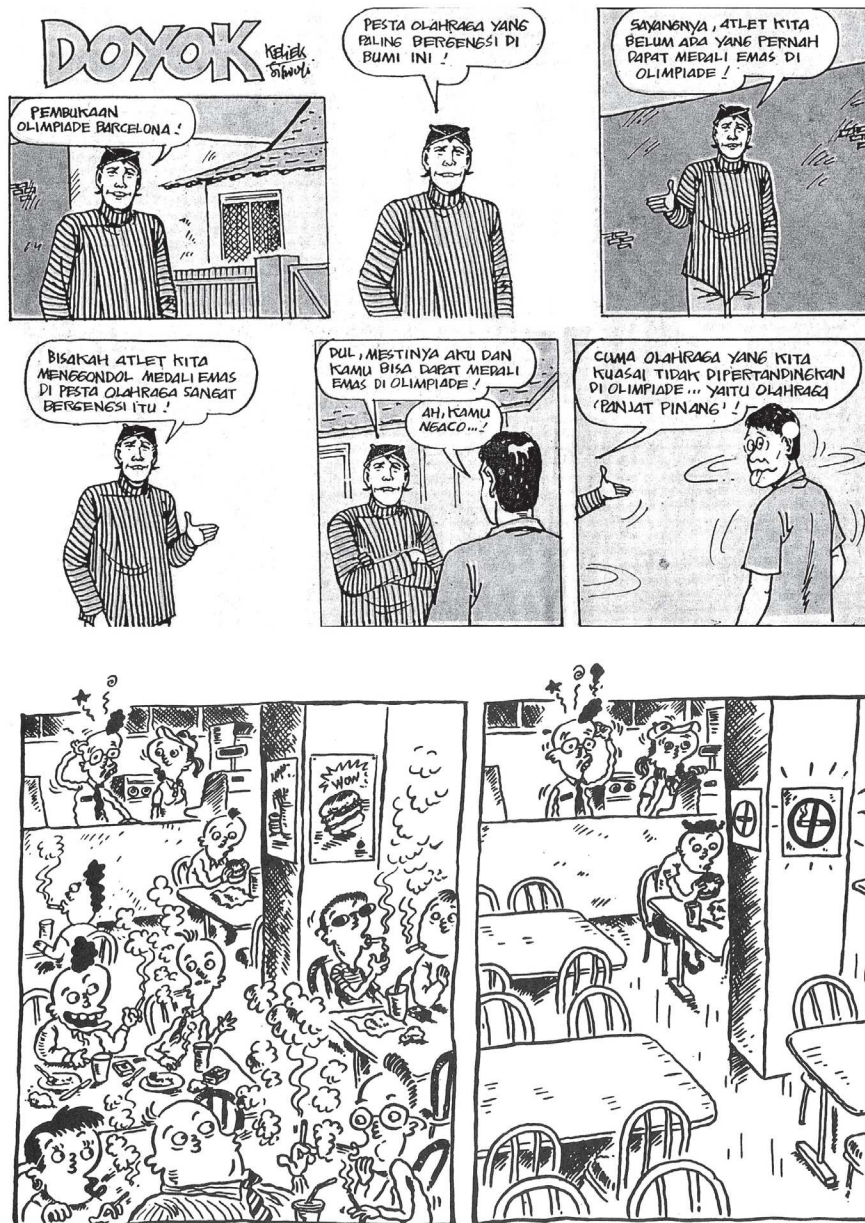


**FIG. 7.7.** Two popular strips, *Doyok* (top) by Keliek Siswoyo and *Benny & Mice* by Benny Rachmadi (Benny) and Muhammad Misrad (Mice).

*Doyok* is also a daily commentary on social or political issues. Created by Keliek Siswoyo, *Doyok* has been the most popular strip in the “Lembergar” section of *Pos Kota*. *Doyok* is a shrewd thinker, sarcastic but realistic, who provides insight into the public’s mind. The strip is systematically organized: in the first panel, *Doyok* speaks a word (for example, cold, going abroad, bent), which then serves as the discussion topic; panels two and three deliver his comments, and the final panel yields a question seeking a reaction “forever out of the frame,” too complex to put into words (Ajidarma 2002).

*Benny & Mice* is a collaborative effort of Benny Rachmadi and Muhammad Misrad, of the Art Institute of Indonesia in Jakarta. The cartoon has existed in strip form since 2003 and as comic books since 1997. *Kartun Benny & Mice* appeared in the Sunday comics section of *Kompas*, with Rachmadi and Misrad re-creating themselves as comic characters. Benny and Mice, although adults, “act like, and have the characteristic of, teenagers, ever trying to be free from various norms and rules” (Rizal and Elsanti 2008). Although such behavior is frowned upon in Indonesia, that is the very reason





**FIG. 7.8.** Indonesia's second cartoon/humor magazine named *HumOr*, begun on October 10, 1990, by the Tempo media group. No. 42, June 24–July 1, 1992. Courtesy of Kemala Atmojo.

*Benny & Mice* has been so successful. J. J. Rizal and Rani Elsanti (2008) saw this do-as-we-please behavior as the cartoonists' "protest against the government and the rich elite that have left their ubiquitous mark too strongly on Jakarta. It is an act of resistance."

Humor magazines *Astaga*, *Idola* (Ideal), and *HumOr* were important venues for comic strips during the 1980s and 1990s. Two periodicals called *HumOr* existed; the first started in 1980, the second on October 10, 1990. The latter, part of Tempo, one of the country's largest media groups, took over the management of the first

*HumOr*, which had "many problems" (Badrudin 1992). The editor of *HumOr*, Kemala Atmojo (1992), emphasized: "We have a different style, quality, design, and performance from the old *HumOr*." Published fortnightly, *HumOr* had eighty-four pages, 40 percent of which were cartoons. In 1992, *HumOr* had forty thousand subscribers, far short of its seventy thousand to one hundred thousand target but above the break-even figure of thirty thousand (Mahtum 1992). At that time, the magazine was the most important venue for both professional and amateur cartoonists. The staff consisted of fifteen

cartoonists and writers and more than a hundred freelancers. Atmojo (1992) said that the magazine's pay scale allowed cartoonists to earn a living, if they lived in small cities with low living cost indexes and if they drew about ten cartoons per month. The goals of *HumOr* were to provide readers with excellent drawings and ideas that provoked instant laughter, and to stay within government guidelines. Because of economic difficulties and the closure of its parent company, Tempo, *HumOr* quit publishing in 1996 (Koendoro 2004).

## The Contemporary Scene

### Comics Publishers and Communities

The publishing of comic books was revived in the twenty-first century when every major publishing house developed its own comic book production section and the comics groups continued to operate.

The largest producer of comics in Indonesia is m&c! Comics, which started in the 1980s as *Komik Majalah*, a publisher of foreign comic books and, after the late 1990s, mainly manga. An arm of the huge business corporation Kompas Gramedia Group, m&c! Comics also publishes Indonesian comics under its Koloni imprint, which it aims to distribute worldwide. Other comics also fall under Gramedia affiliates, notably *Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia (KPG)*, which brings out the popular Benny & Mice collections. KPG editors nourished the careers of Benny Rachmadi and Muhammad Misrad, giving them the opportunity to publish their book series *Legak Jakarta* (Jakarta exploits), which yielded titles such as *Trend dan Prilaku* (Trend and attitude), *Transportasi* (Transportation), *Profesi* (Profession), *Krisis . . . Oh Krisis* (Crisis, oh crisis) and *Reformasi* (Reformation). (*Huru-Hara*) *Huru Huru Pemilu '99* ([Chaos] carnival of '99 general election), *Lost in Bali*, and *100 Tokoh yang Mewarnai Jakarta* (100 figures that color Jakarta) are other Benny & Mice books under the KPG imprint (see Rizal and Elsanti 2008). Papillon Studio of Semarang also has ties to Gramedia



FIG. 7.9. Creativ Media's manual, *14 Jurus Membuat Komik* (Creating comics in 14 steps), written and illustrated by Toni Masdiono. Courtesy of Toni Masdiono.

through Elex Media Komputindo, which publishes Papillon's manga-like comics.

Mizan Press in Bandung, with its children's division Dar! (Divisi Anak dan Remaja!) Mizan, publishes textbooks in comics style as well as local comics series. Mizan Publika started up in 1983, responding, according to its own corporate literature, to the "demand for quality books for Indonesian Muslim readers." Dar! Mizan followed in 1992, officially becoming a business unit of Mizan Publika in 2003; its comics line was developed in 1997. More than twenty-five authors, twenty studios, and twenty illustrators work for or with Dar! Mizan. The Mizan Indonesian Comics line aims to resurrect Indonesian comics by local artists (Widyawanti 2003).

Also creating and publishing comics are Terrant Comic, Dahara Comic, Komunitas Nisita, Riko Amer Production, Gagah Media, Asy Syaamil, Jagoan Comic, Bajak Laoet, Mediacela, Kamikazi, Daging Tumbuh, Baskara, Caravan Studio, Creativ Media, Concept Media, and Curhat Anak Bangsa, among others.





FIG. 7.10. A page from *Transition* (2006), a graphic diary drawn by Dwinita Larasati reflecting her move from being an expatriate in the Netherlands to a returning citizen in Indonesia. Courtesy of Dwinita Larasati.

Caravan Studio, founded in 2008, is a group of artists working on comics pages, graphic novels, illustration, and toy and concept design commissioned by Marvel, Tokyopop, Hasbro, Mattel, and other foreign companies. An older comics publisher is Creativ Media; in 1998, it issued Toni Masdiono's short manual on cartooning techniques, *14 Jurus Membuat Komik* (Creating comics in 14 steps). Concept Media is a design company sponsored by an international advertising agency; Masdiono (2008) credited Concept with reinstituting *cergam* as a localized word for comics. Concept's *Alia* is presented as "100% Komik Indonesia," although the publication's drawings, characters, and stories have little resemblance to the national culture. In 2008, Concept held a youth comicon called Bangkit (Wake up for Cergam).

Curhat Anak Bangsa (CAB) was started in 2008 to publish the borderless stories Dr. Dwinita Larasati had sent as diaries to her mother while Larasati was

pursuing postgraduate studies in Europe. Upon her return to Bandung, Larasati's diaries were seen by Rony Amdani, "a clever man who knew how to define the market" (Larasati 2011b); he suggested that the two of them establish Curhat Anak Bangsa (Outpouring of a nation). Larasati (2011b) readily agreed, because "my type of drawing had no commercial value in Indonesia." CAB brought out four of her books (*Curhat Tita*, *Transition*, *Back in Bandung*, and *Kidstuff*), as well as other titles such as Sheila Rooswitha's *Cerita Silala* and *Tersesat di Byzantium*, and a series, *Mantra*, drawn by Azisa Noor and written by Amdani. The latter series was meant to capture the audience accustomed to reading romance manga, with the difference that the stories would reflect deeper societal values (Larasati 2011a, 141). In late 2009, CAB paired four female artists with four children with HIV/AIDS to tell the latter's stories in a graphic diary, *Berbagi Hidup* (Sharing life). The same year, CAB invited nine artists to create seven pages of graphic diary within a week to be published in an anthology, *Seven*; both the event and the book are now done annually (Larasati 2013).

Besides introducing the graphic diary style to Indonesia, CAB and Larasati also made a space for females in comics creation, this time with their "own styles, stories, and characteristics" (Larasati 2011a, 137). As Angela Moreno Acosta (2011, 194) wrote of Larasati: "She is an example that not all women who go into the business of comics do so because of Japanese manga's influence."

Comics production in Indonesia often involves groups and studios of artists that publish independently or in conjunction with media and publishing houses. Berman (2005) said that Indonesia has the largest number of independent *komikus* (comics artists) in Southeast Asia and is the "envy of its neighbors" in quality of work and in number of comics organizations and conventions. She explained that studios and the many groups allow artists to work independently while forming collectives with friends who support their individuality.

As a gauge of their prevalence, such comics groups made up most of the nineteen comics producers that



participated in Cergambore, the Festival of Comics, held in Surabaya in March 2009. They included Comics Gangster, Suicide, Sungsang, Imaji, National Child Work, False Comic, Neo Paradigm Neo, Outline Reborn, Syndicate, Virgin Is Suck, Wipe, Nasi Putih, Romance Surabaya Comic, and Wind Ryder. Nasi Putih of Jember is a group of youth from various educational backgrounds who initiate art community events and publish comic books and a bulletin. Romance Surabaya Comic, whose members are film, independent music, and comics practitioners or aficionados, set out to publish a host of original comic books beginning in 2008 (see Nugroho 2009c). Another young people's community, Akademi Samali, founded by Hikmat Darmawan, Zarky, and Beng Rahadian, based its activities on education, discourse creation, and production and published a series of comic books that mirrored problems in Jakarta: *Jakarta Senggol Dikit* (A tiny bump into Jakarta), *Jakarta Senggol-Senggolan* (Bumping around in Jakarta), and *Jakarta Senggal Senggol* (Jakarta bumping). One writer (Shiddiq 2009) criticized the books for their poor technical mastery and their creators' lack of life experiences from which to draw on in shaping stories.

Some groups create mainstream in addition to independent comics. Wind Ryder Studio publishes *Wind Ryder* but also the independent black-and-white work *Komikugrafi*; Neo Paradigm Neo brings out the full-color comics *Aquanus* and *Benuake Tujuh* as well as black-and-white comics under the title *Defragment*. Id Nugroho (2009c) felt it necessary that groups move into the mainstream industry, because their independent titles had limited scope and impact (see Nugroho 2009b).

Various other comic books have appeared in recent years. In 2005, Dwi Koendoro and his Citra Audivistama Studio issued a Komik Laga Canda series that retells Indonesian legends, with his famous character Panji Koming somehow involved. In 1999, Koendoro, together with *Kompas* and Mizan Komik Indonesia, compiled Panji Koming stories from the 1985–1988 period into two comic books. Notable also was *Sequen*, a comics magazine that appeared in four numbers in 2006. The

product of Iwan Gunawan, the bimonthly featured articles, profiles, news, and reviews primarily about Indonesian comics and their creators from both historical and contemporary perspectives. Cartoonists profiled were R. A. Kosasih, Doank, Anto, and Taguan Hardjo. Other comics magazines that tried to develop a discourse on cergam over the years included *Aneka Komiks* in the 1950s, *ERES* in the 1970s, and, more recently, *Spark*, *Splash*, *CERGAM*, *Cergam Kampungan*, and *Comiqal Magazine*. All had short lives (Gunawan 2013a).

### Types and Genres

A peculiar and long-standing genre are children's comics that borrow the name of the Danish fairy tale author Hans Christian Andersen. Although the stories are usually Indonesian in origin, "they need to have Andersen's name attached to them, almost like a seal of approval, to be accepted" (Purbaya 2013).

Also, still popular in some quarters are old Indonesian classic comics, reprinted or remade by small presses such as Pustaka Satria Sejati, Pluz Book Store, Anjaya Books, and Maranatha Books. Some of these are redrawn by artists of an earlier generation such as Hans Jaladara and Mansyur Daman (Man). Works of comics leaders R. A. Kosasih, Jan Mintaraga, Ganes Th., Hasmi, Teguh Santosa, and Gerdie W. K. have also been reprinted recently.

The oldest and largest reprinter of the classics is Maranatha Books in Bandung, founded in 1963 by bookstore owner and comics fan Marcus Haddy and operated since his death in 1991 by his widow, Erlina Tan. The company reprints twenty-four hardcover classics every year, which then are distributed to bookstores all over Indonesia by eight agents on Tan's staff. "The agents are like family members; I have one in every major city," she said; "they receive a 50 percent commission" (Tan 2013). Tan does not know the total number of titles reprinted but estimates that it is in the several hundreds. In comics' heyday of the 1960–1970s, print runs were twenty-five hundred copies; today, one thousand copies of each title are printed on demand, based on agents' reports.

Haddy began the reprint component of his business by asking Kosasih and other 1960s comics artists to draw new versions of works they had done for the publisher Melodi, with the intention of selling them in his bookstore. Tan (2013) said that there was no copyright then; Haddy paid the artists a flat fee per page and kept the original artwork. She explained: “Marcus kept the originals when other publishers didn’t. They didn’t value the original art. When Melodi folded, Marcus bought all their original books except for three.” About her own involvement in the business, Tan (2013) said: “At first, I did not understand the business. I was used to taking care of the kids, taking them to school, working in the kitchen. I knew nothing about the comics business. After my husband died, I had to love the business.”

Anjaya Books and Pluz Book Store are connected in that Andy Wijaya, who opened Anjaya in 2005, also owns 40 percent of S. Gienardy’s Pluz. Wijaya started reprinting classic comics because, at the time, it was difficult to find local comic books, and those that did exist were expensive. He pays the creators a flat fee and, like Haddy, keeps the originals. He explained that Anjaya reprints titles that Pluz may refuse (Wijaya 2013). Gienardy S., a son of Ganes Th., opened his comics store in 2008 and began to reprint the works of Ganes and his contemporaries, because, as he said, “the regular bookstores only carried foreign comics” (Gienardy 2013). Pluz pays royalties to the families of deceased artists on the first two thousand copies of a title, regardless whether they sell. The company brings out two or three reprinted titles yearly. Gienardy (2013) and others agreed that among the classics, wayang is the most popular genre, followed by silat (martial arts) and superhero. In fact, Pluz’s first reprint was Teguh Santosa’s wayang classic *Riwayat Pandawa*, which will be reprinted again (in English) by a restaurant chain owner who plans to sell copies as souvenirs to expatriates and business patrons (Gienardy 2013).

Reprinting forty- to fifty-year-old comics offers challenges. Andy Wijaya (2013) avoids redoing romance comics because characters’ hairstyles and clothes would need to be modified, along with

pictured technological devices (dial telephones, small TV sets, etc.). Language is another factor, in that the spelling of Bahasa Indonesia has been streamlined (*j* has become *y*, *dj* is now *j*, *tj* is *c*, etc.) (Gunawan 2013b). Maranatha changes these spellings in reprints because it is “difficult for children to read the old style” (Tan 2013), while Pluz retains the original language out of a sense of purity (Gienardy 2013).

Mustaqim Karna (2007, 318) felt that this activity closes the generation gap, “allowing the young generation to learn from their predecessors.” The remaking of Indonesian classic comics has come under fire at times, the fear being that the new versions could take away “the value or characteristics of the original works” (Karna 2007, 317) and that they could sacrifice some of their own creativity.

Most younger cartoonists adopt or adapt styles, stories, and ideas from foreign comics, mainly from Japan and to lesser degrees from the United States and Europe. Karna (2007, 318) gave this new generation of artists credit for striving “to blend styles and develop original artwork that differ[s] from others.” The most pervasive outside influence today is manga, which still controls 90 percent of the country’s comics market. Even legitimate publishing houses print pirated manga. Manga can be bought or rented nearly anywhere in Indonesia; many titles are national obsessions among the young. A manga graphic novel sells for twelve thousand rupiah (US\$1.07) and rents for two thousand rupiah (US\$0.17) (Abraham 2010, 47). One impact of this availability is that indigenous sequential art usually is done in manga style. Fueling this manga mania are art schools and many anime/manga conventions, for example Animonster Sound.

Manga is so popular that publishers have been known to instruct artists to draw in that style, or to change aspects of comic books to look Japanese. Publisher Edi Lim (2004) said that he cannot sell Indonesian comics but, “once we convert them to Japanese style and change the names,” the books sell. He gave reasons other than popularity for using manga: “most of the time, it is cheaper to pay a license fee to Japan than it is to use Indonesian titles”; and, because Indonesian cartoonists



FIG. 7.11. *Morina* by Taguan Hardjo appeared in 1962, calling itself *nopel bergambar*, which, in the local dialect on Sumatra, means graphic novel.

do not meet deadlines, manga provides a steadier supply of material (Lim 2004).

Of the manga, *yaoi* (boy's love) has much appeal in Indonesia, especially among women, a number of whom produce this comics genre. It is usually found underground, online, and at anime/manga conventions; the largest online forum for boy's love is Indonesian Yaoi Front. Although the Internet is mostly unrestricted in Indonesia, yaoi publishers must be careful under the country's laws and moral standards. There are vague, long-standing laws that stifle yaoi, one of which is Kitab Undang-undang Hukum Perdata (1945), which restricts "prurient materials," prohibits anything that arouses teenagers' sexual urges, and proscribes materials that violate "ethical norms" (Abraham 2010, 48). A newer bill passed on October 30, 2008, is more clearly defined and specifically includes cartoons. Publishers of yaoi make sure that at conventions, their books are wrapped with a front-cover warning.

At times, there is discourse in Indonesia concerning manga's effects on a national style, but some cartoonists, for instance Dwi Koendoro and Toni Masdiono, are not

disturbed by its presence. Koendoro (2007) thought that manga could serve as a model for effective marketing and communications; Masdiono (2008) said that much can be learned from manga about the development of stories and drawings.

Graphic novels as a type of comic art have existed in Indonesia since 1962, when Taguan Hardjo created *Morina*, published by Firma Harris in Medan. On *Morina*'s cover were the words "Nopel Bergambar" in the local dialect, meaning picture or graphic novel. During the 1970s, *komik bundels* ("word bundles") appeared as complete series of comics (cergam) consisting of about two hundred pages each (Masdiono 2010a, 578). To stretch the point further that Indonesia was an early adopter of the graphic novel, anthologies of cartoonists' works that some scholars contend are graphic novels existed in the country in the 1970s. Cartoonists whose works were assembled in book form were Pramono, Hidajat, Sudarta, Koendoro, and Priyanto S. (Pramono 1992).

During the 2000s, more finitely labeled graphic novels appeared, particularly from m&c! Comics. With the goals of producing local works while instilling the Japanese work ethic in their creators, m&c! in April 2009 invited twenty Indonesian cartoonists to produce graphic novels under strict guidelines. Ten were ultimately signed up by the company; each was given a three-month deadline to draw a graphic novel, which m&c! would publish under its Koloni imprint. Eight artists rose to the challenge of producing forty to sixty pages a month. The result was eight black-and-white titles in the genres of action, mystery, and romance. According to the founder of Komikindonesia.com, Surjorimba Suroto, two Koloni titles stood out: Azisa Noor's *Satu Atap* (One roof), about the ups and downs of a teenager, and Yuniarto's *Garudayana*, concerning the Hindu mythical bird Garuda. Another Koloni title, *Ngabuburit*,<sup>2</sup> is an anthology of five short comics on the theme of fighting temptation during Ramadan. Generally, Koloni aims to publish stories to which teenagers can relate. A recent Koloni catalog provided synopses of thirteen titles that fit the categories of action, fantasy, adventure, school life, mystery, genki-style action, sci-fi/



romance, shōjō, and shonen (boys' comics). Although only the latter two were labeled as Japanese genres, almost all books had manga-type characters. Two books had 192 pages each, the rest 128 pages; only two were in full color.

A historical graphic novel, *Lebur Ring Klungkung* (Annihilated at Klungkung), came out in 2004, part of an effort by a group of Balinese animators, poets, and a publisher to boost youth interest in the island's history. Seven hundred copies of the graphic novel were distributed free to schools in Klungkung, Bali. The story depicts the efforts of the royal house of Klungkung to resist the invading Dutch on April 28, 1908. The publisher of a Lintang children's tabloid organized the project, as he had done earlier of the first comic book competition in Bali. Two poets wrote the story, and four contest winners drew it (Juniartha 2003). A second graphic novel based on a historical event was also planned.

The graphic novel form is used for other educational and social consciousness-raising purposes in Indonesia. The group Lazuardi Birru launched *Ketika Nurani Bicara* (When conscience speaks) as a 130-page graphic novel in 2010, with the aim of showing young Indonesians that they are seen as potential recruits by radical Islamists. Reviewing the 2002 terrorist bombing in Bali, the book is told from the viewpoints of one of the actual bombers, a rescuer, and a victim. Meticulously researched, *Ketika Nurani Bicara* was distributed in bulk, free to schools and mosques (Barley 2010). Another graphic novel in the same vein served as a manual of intellectual property rights protection in Indonesia. Called *Protect IPR Right Now*, the 78-page English-language book appeared in 2001, following earlier Japanese- and Indonesian-language versions. It covers the law and ethics of IPR in detail, using six characters who are profiled in the beginning, following the style of Dwi Koendoro, the book's artist. Insan Budi Maulana wrote the story. Of course, age-old genres in Indonesia such as folktale/legend, martial arts, detective, humor, war/national heroes and politics, wayang, and romance have continued to varying degrees. The

country's different ethnic groups with their own stories and legends perpetuate their traditions in folklore cer-gam. Detective comics have been around since at least the 1960s, influenced in part by popular spy thrillers such as the James Bond movies; comics about national heroes and historical events have been part of educational programs often commissioned by government bodies (Gunawan 2013a).

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## Summary

Generally, an upbeat mood has pervaded the comics profession in Indonesia since 2000. There are reasons for such optimism: (1) New publishers are emerging, not just in Jakarta and Bandung but also in Solo, Yogyakarta, and Surabaya; (2) Some studios can sustain themselves, and therefore produce local comics, because of revenue from outsourcing work; (3) A spirit of creating Indonesian-style comics is alive and well, with big publishers adding other formats to that of manga (for example, the graphic novel), popularizing local characters (Panji Koming, Timun, Bung Sentil, Bda, Benny & Mice, Sukribo, Kompopilan, and others), and reprinting the cergam of yesterday's masters (Masdiono 2010b); (4) Artists are much freer than during the New Order regime and have more opportunities to publish their works; (5) The comics community has embraced professionalism with the establishment of associations, training schemes, conferences, and exhibitions; (6) An augmented interest in comic art worldwide, because of its adaptability to cinema, television, and new media and its potential for profit in the global market, has taken root in Indonesia; and (7) The male domination of comics production in Indonesia has been broken, with women artists and writers now far outnumbering men (Karna 2007, 322; Masdiono 2008; Larasati 2011b).

Short of a resurgence of economic or political turmoil, which Indonesia is no stranger to, comics production seems to have a chance of surviving and maybe even prospering.

## Notes

1. Iwan Gunawan (2013a) identified two strips drawn by foreigners while they were in Indonesia in the 1930s and 1940s. From 1935 to 1940, an American artist, Billy Cam, drew *CAMouFLAGES* for *D'Orient* magazine, depicting life during the Dutch colonial era; in 1944–1945, the Japanese artist Saseo Ono created *Papaya Pa'chan* (*Pi'chan*) in *Kana Djawa Sinbun*, designed to promote the ideology of the Japanese occupiers.
2. Ngabuburit is a Sundanese term for whiling away time before breaking fast at dusk (Siahaan 2009).

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Comic art in Malaysia has had to fit into a complex geographical/political system. First, throughout the British colonial period and into the 1960s, Malaya and Singapore were politically intertwined, and their comic art histories were likewise connected. Second, the country is multiethnic and multilingual (and has been called a “cultural rainbow”), a result of which is that its cartoons and comics have appeared in four languages: Bahasa Malaysia (Malay), English, Chinese, and Tamil. Third, Malaysia is geographically split, with eleven states on the peninsula and two on the island of Borneo (West and East Malaysia, respectively).

These factors have affected comic art in that multiethnicity has determined storytelling, plot, and character development as well as set limits at times on how the different cultures’ issues and personalities have been depicted. The relative isolation of Sabah and Sarawak in East Malaysia has left these states with a weak comic art history, although some change is now apparent with exhibitions in Sabah, the establishment of Pakatun (the Sabah Cartoon Association), and the publishing of Sarawak’s first Bahasa Malaysia cartoon magazine, *Apai*, in 2004.

Because Bahasa Malaysia is the country’s official national language, this chapter will concentrate on Malay cartoons and comics, which have indeed been dominant in Malaysia. However, Chinese and English cartooning receive coverage whenever appropriate.

The first known regularly published Malay-language cartoons<sup>1</sup> appeared in the 1930s in *Warta Jenaka* and *Utusan Zaman*, newspapers both published in Singapore. The newspapers may have been late to adopt cartoons, according to Mulyadi Mahamood (2004, 97), because they modeled themselves after the Middle Eastern Arabic press, which generally shunned the use of illustrations. *Warta Jenaka*’s editorial cartoons were provided by S. B. Ally and various readers, whose styles were rudimentary and rough. According to Redza (1973), Ally’s cartoons incorporated *bangsawan* (traditional theater) hairstyles and actors’ costumes. They satirized foreign and local issues such as poverty, immigration, and colonization. *Utusan Zaman*, the Sunday edition

## Chapter 8

# Malaysia

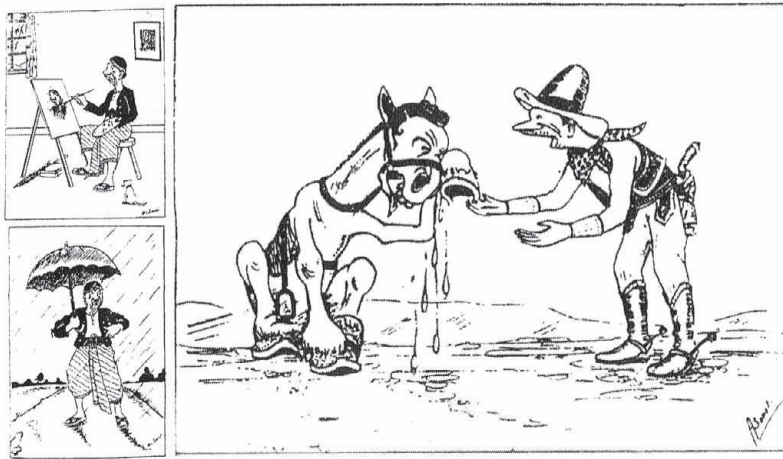


FIG. 8.1. *Wak Ketok* by Ali Sanat. *Utusan Zaman*, November 12, 1939, and January 21, 1940. Courtesy of Muliyadi Mahamood.

of *Utusan Melayu* and the first newspaper owned and staffed by native Malays, featured cartoons from its 1939 beginnings, including Malaya's first comic strip, *Wak Ketok* (Uncle Knock, referring to the protagonist's penchant for attacking). The character was created by noted journalist Rahim Kajai and drawn by Ali Sanat, who also did political cartoons. Until the Japanese invasion in February 1942, Ali Sanat was *Utusan Zaman's* sole cartoonist. When the paper resumed at the war's end in 1945, *Wak Ketok* was replaced by a satirical column, *Hantu Wak Ketok* (The ghost of *Wak Ketok*). At that time, a slapstick humor strip, *Jenaka* (Farce), appeared, with jokes revolving around four main characters (Muliyadi 2004, 19–66).

The earliest cartoons and strips were characterized by long captions, often containing proverbs and “*pan-tuns* [folk ditties], rhyming elaborate sentences” (Muliyadi 2004, 67). *Wak Ketok* has even been compared to *wayang kulit* (shadow play). Other traits of preindependence (before 1957) cartoons were the use of contrast in drawing style, animal imagery, and trademark characters, some based on figures in literature (Muliyadi 2004, 290–93).

During World War II, some propagandistic, anti-Japanese cartoons in Malay (e.g., *Kerana Rakyat* [For the people]) were published, as well as others that appeared in the first Malay-language film magazine, *Film Melayu*. Raja Hamzah and nationalist leader Senu Abdul Rahman also drew nationalistic comics as “a way of relieving the scarcity of Malay-language reading materials during the Japanese occupation” (Provencher 1995, 183). Another wartime cartoonist, Abdullah Ariff, drew strips for a Japanese newspaper, *Penang Shimbun*,

which were collected in a fifty-page book, *Perang Pada Pandangan Juru-Lukis Kita* (The war as our cartoonist sees it), published in November 1942. The forty-five cartoons included in the book were decidedly pro-Japanese, drawing Allied forces in a negative vein. Captions appeared in Malay, English, and Chinese. Never tried as a collaborator, Abdullah became a prominent Malaysian politician after the war (Lim 2009).

Newspaper comic strips and comic books started to come into their own during the postwar period and developed through the 1950s and 1960s, although most newspaper strips were still foreign, syndicated works. Malaysia's premier cartoonist, Lat (Mohd. Nor Khalid), said that previous to his *Si Mamat* strip in 1968, “there was nothing. They only printed foreign comics, and they didn't draw us. It was not Malaysian. . . . It always had something to do with something Western involved” (Lat 1986).

But newspapers and magazines at that time did publish local political cartoons, one-panel humor cartoons, and strips by Raja Hamzah, Rejabhad, Mishar (Sariman Mior Hasan), and others. Most of the strips dealt with social themes, especially family life and husband-wife relationships, addressing family values, Malay attitudes, modernization, and moral issues (Muliyadi 2004, 107). Perhaps what Lat had alluded to was the flood of Western strips after 1957, and translations of works by Peng in *Berita Harian*. The latter were mainstays of the English-language *Straits Times* (later, the *New Straits Times*).

*Berita Harian*, a Malay-language sister of the *New Straits Times*, from its first issue on July 1, 1957, promoted cartoons, proudly declaring on its front page:





FIG. 8.2. *The Curse of the Spook*, an early comic strip by Raja Hamzah in *Utusan Zaman*. February 1, 1959. On the right, a Raja Hamzah comic book.

And finally, we present our collection of comic pictures—the largest collection to be found in a newspaper in Malaya.

You will enjoy seeing Mat Jambul and his wife Gayah, a popular couple, which has been created specially for *Berita Harian*.

You will be delighted by the adventures of Tarzan, Mandrake, and the Saint, and by the humorous stories of Si-Kechil (The Small One), Tok Misai (Grandpa Moustache), Gadis dan Teruna (Girl and Boy), and Pelukis Ajaib (The Magic Artist).

That's not all. We promise that every day this week *Berita Harian* will publish a new story which is wonderful and interesting. (*Berita Harian*, July 1, 1957, 1; translation by Muliyadi Mahamood)

*Mat Jambul's Family* was created by Raja Hamzah, a pivotal cartoonist in postwar Malaya who also drew the *Utusan Melayu/Utusan Zaman* strips *Dol Keropok & Wak Tempeh* (1956), *Sumpah Hantu Jerangkong* (The curse of the spook), and *Tangan Hantu Jerangkong* (The spook's hand), the latter two horror stories published in the late 1950s. Raja Hamzah produced fourteen different comic strips for *Berita Minggu* (the Sunday edition of *Berita Harian*), all of which, except *Pembunuh Si Durjana* (The wicked murderer), were set in ancient Malaya or featured literature from Persia. Most strip series lasted ten to fifteen episodes, except *Kelana* (The rambler), which extended to more than four hundred. In his works,

Raja Hamzah featured village life, humor, satire, and criticism of Malay attitudes (Muliyadi 2004, 133–45).

Malayans became comic book readers by accident when, in the late 1930s, British titles such as *The Beano*, *The Dandy*, *Beezer*, and *Topper* came in as scrap wrapping paper sold by weight. The first Malay comic books came out in the 1940s, from the pens of Raja Hamzah and others, who fashioned the books as serious works written in Jawi (Arabic) script and focusing on the Malay nationalist movement. As Ronald Provencher (1995, 183) explained, they were known for “portraying and reinterpreting various aspects of Malay folklore and Malay classical literature, possibly as a pride-filled response to the success of the Malay nationalist movement.” By the 1950s and 1960s, the Malay Press, Zawiyah, Penerbitan Keluarga, Penerbitan Melayu, Kassim Ahmad, Jabatan Pelajaran dan Persuratan Kedah, and Sinaran Brothers published comic books. Sinaran Brothers, one of the primary publishers, introduced the works of Abd. Razak (*Inspektor Rahman*), Halim The (*Berjasa; Sinar Alam*), and Saidan Yahya (*Hang Tuah*).

The 1960s and 1970s marked the most significant gains for comic art. A new generation of cartoonists made names for themselves, bolstered by the creation of an association, the staging of a cartoon exhibition, and the publication of humor magazines.

Some of the cartoonists who became famous during this time started their careers in the 1950s, notably

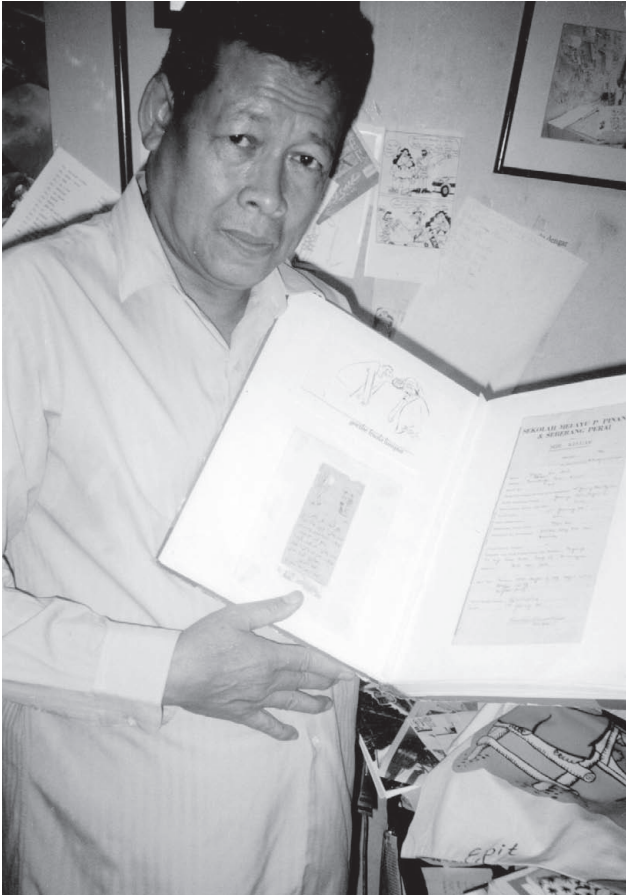


FIG. 8.3. Comics pioneer Rejabhad showing the first cartoon he drew. Kuala Lumpur, July 21, 2000. Photo by John A. Lent.

Rejabhad, who said that his first cartoon appeared in 1958, the same year he began his twenty-year career in the army. His military duties involved sketching scenes (including combat) that he witnessed. Some of those experiences were revisited in his strip *Prebet Dabus* (Private Dabus) and the album *Dengan Rejabhad* (1983) (Rejabhad 2000; for more on Rejabhad, see Provencher 1996, 55–75).

Among others whose careers blossomed during the so-called golden age were Osman Baru, Meor Shariman, Alias Kulup, Hassan Rosdin, Nora Abdullah, Zarni, Lat, Nan, Jaafar Taib, and Zainal Buang Hussein.

Lat's career started when he published his first cartoon at age thirteen. He takes delight in telling that the publisher, thinking that he was an adult, addressed him in correspondence as "tuan" (sir), and that his payment was two movie tickets (Lat 1986; see also Lent 1987, 28–30; Lent 1999, 35–39). At seventeen, Lat started drawing the strip *Si Mamat* on a weekly basis for *Berita*



FIG. 8.4. Lat (Mohd. Nor Khalid). Shah Alam, Malaysia, July 8, 2012. Photo by Xu Ying.

*Minggu*; a year later, he joined the daily *New Straits Times*, where he was assigned crime reporter duties, which he did for four years until making his break in 1974. Although Lat quit the *New Straits Times* in 1984 to establish his own company, *Kampung Boy*, he continued to draw for the paper every week, three *Scenes of Malaysian Life* editorial cartoons and six front-page pocket cartoons. He discontinued the *Si Mamat* strip in 1994. "I left the *New Straits Times* years ago, but now I'm doing double duty for them," Lat said, explaining: "The money is good, and when I think about money, I think of my children" (Lat 2000). Additionally, he regularly publishes book collections of his work that are very visible in Malaysia and Singapore bookstores.

Others imitate Lat's style, hoping that they will attain his commercial and artistic success. Lat has made a comfortable living by merchandising and commercializing his work; at the same time, according to art critic Redza Piyadasa, he has elevated cartooning to the level of "high visual arts" through his social commentary and "construction of the landscape" (quoted in Jir 1989). While lamenting that many Malaysian cartoonists do not know how to market their work, Jaafar Taib, cartoonist and managing director of Creative Enterprise, singled out Lat as different, because he "takes into consideration the image, mentality, economy,



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## The life of an independant cartoonist.

FIG. 8.5. Lat's depiction of his work space. Courtesy of Lat.

stroke, characters; you can enjoy his cartoon ten years later—very intellectual, cynical message and multiracial” (Jaafar 2000). For his contributions, Lat was given the honorific title of *datuk* by the government in the early 1990s, and his work has been reprinted all over the world, adapted into an animated television series (*Kampung Boy*) in the 1990s, displayed on both sides of an Air Asia airplane, converted to symphonic scores by the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra, and made into a musical in 2011.

In all of this work, Lat makes social comments on Malaysia, ranging from “village life as seen through [a] young boy’s eyes, to national politics, as observed by an irreverent bystander” (Suhaini 1989, 42). He insists that

he is apolitical although *Scenes of Malaysian Life* has exposed alleged Israeli military excesses, caricatured Malaysian political leaders, and taken swipes at Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore (Dunfee 1989, 9; see also Chandy 1980, 40–41; Lim 1994b, 59–60).

Nan (Zainal Osman) gained fame in 1976 with *Den Teksi* (Taxi Din), *Utusan Melayu*’s first noteworthy strip since Raja Hamzah left in 1959. *Den Teksi* featured the antics of taxi driver Pak Din, his wife, three children, and two cats. The same year, Nan drew the weekly slapstick strip *Barber’s Corner* also in *Utusan Melayu* (Mulyadi 2004, 131, 182). Jaafar Taib worked at *Utusan Malaysia* in the 1970s, drawing serious classic comics. There, he was exposed to the humor magazines *Mad* and *Crazy*



*Foo* (Hong Kong) (Jaafar 2000), and, in 1978, he and four others founded *Gila-Gila* (Crazy about *Mad*) humor magazine.

The year 1973 figured prominently in the development of comic art in Malaysia, with the establishment of Persatuan Pelukis Komik Kartun dan Ilustrasi (PERPEKSI; the Association of Comic, Cartoon, and Illustration Artists), the publishing of *Ha Hu Hum*, and the launching of the educational comics publisher Suarasa. Also that year, in October, the National Art Gallery mounted an exhibition of cartoons from Malaysia, the Philippines, South Korea, and South Vietnam that was probably the country's first such event, despite claims by Rejabhad and others that *Kartun '83*, staged a decade later at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, held that honor. (The author was the main speaker at the 1973 exhibition.)

PERPEKSI established goals to promote better wages and working conditions for cartoonists, establish professional standards, develop branch organizations in various Malaysian states, and publish a periodical. The members could not agree on suitable wages and working conditions because of their very different situations, and PERPEKSI folded, but not before Rejabhad almost single-handedly launched the organization's magazine, *Ha Hu Hum*, also in 1973. Rejabhad resigned after the fourth issue over a disagreement; he believed that humor magazines could attract an adult audience while his publisher, Suarasa, did not (Provencher 1995, 184). *Ha Hu Hum* only lasted one or two issues after that.<sup>2</sup>

In mid-1973, Suarasa, which had been formed by a number of cartoonists, published at least four comic books (Lent 1982, 41). The first of its titles, *Bambino*, had sixteen pages of six strips, letters, puzzles, games, short stories, poetry, folklore, and teasers. The initial press run of ten thousand copies was tripled within a year. Other titles were *Bujal*, a thirty-page book whose main character could have been a twin of the character Sluggo from Ernie Bushmiller's *Nancy*; *Anak Rusa Nani*, sixteen pages of seven strips, puzzles, and the like; and *Rina*, a twenty-four-page comic. The price of these comics was the equivalent of about sixteen to twenty U.S. cents. All

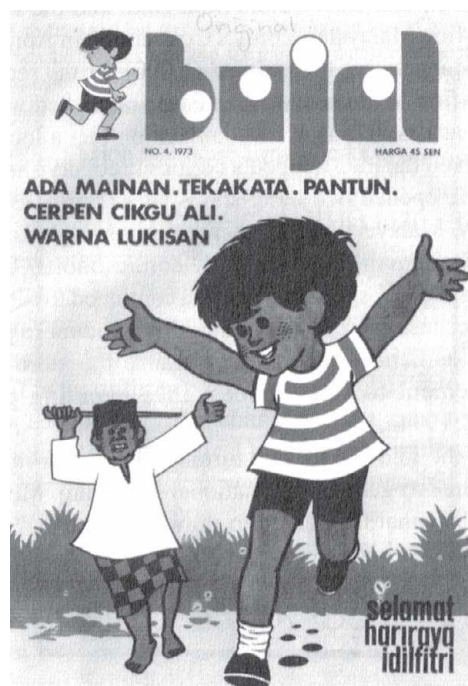


FIG. 8.6. *Bujal* (no. 4, 1973), published by Suarasa, which in mid-1973 tried to further the development of Malaysian comics.

four popularized Malay legends in serialized form and included puzzles and coloring competitions. Suarasa solicited the artists from newspapers, magazines, and agencies (Zailah 1973). Another publisher, Raz Studio, brought out *Salina* and *Teruna*.

Comic art in the 1970s (and before) also had an impact on the famous artists Zulkifli Dahlan, Dzulkifli Buyong, and others who used elements of cartoons and caricatures in their paintings. In his *Satu Haridi Bumi Larangan* (One day in the forbidden land, 1977), Zulkifli has cartoon characters doing their own thing; other of his paintings explore social issues through cartoons and caricature. Two paintings by Dzulkifli identified by Muliyadi (2007a, 77) as cartoon-like were *Kelambu* (Mosquito net, 1964) and *Murid Sekolah* (Student, 1962).

But the 1970s phenomenon that had the most direct impact on cartooning was the establishment of a run of humor magazines, starting with *Gila-Gila* in 1978. Actually, *Gila-Gila* was in the making in 1976, when Mishar, a writer and artist for the government language and literature group Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, pulled together five cartoonists previously with PERPEKSI or *Ha Hu Hum* to form a new humor magazine company. For the first two years, the company they established, Creative

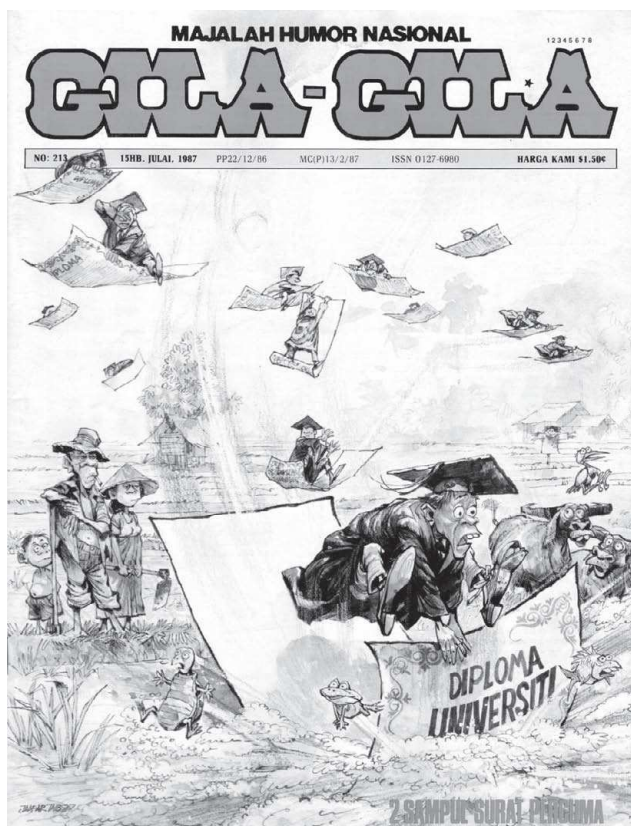


FIG. 8.7. *Gila-Gila* (no. 213, July 1987), the forerunner of a steady stream of humor/cartoon magazines in Malaysia after 1978.

Enterprise, published other types of magazines that already had secure markets (children's magazines and Malay hero/heroine comics), but on April 1 (April Fool's Day), 1978, the company ventured into humor magazines with *Gila-Gila*, an imitator of *Mad* magazine that sold out its first issue of ten thousand copies in a week.

Besides Mishar, the other founders of *Gila-Gila* were Jaafar Taib, Zainal Buang Hussein, Rejabhad, and Azman Yusof. According to Jaafar (2000), initially, the public reaction to launching a humor magazine was "that we were mad," but *Gila-Gila* competed well with all types of magazines and soon sold two hundred thousand copies, outpacing *Wanita* (Woman), which had been Malaysia's biggest-selling magazine. For its content, *Gila-Gila* adapted an assortment of traditional Malay literature, folktales, animal fables, Malay history, and film parodies. Muliyadi (2010, 338) credited the magazine with educating and promoting new cartoonists, emphasizing Malayness and Malaysianess, networking comic artists, advancing the status of the profession, and inspiring the establishment of other cartoon/humor periodicals.

The latter it certainly did. From *Gila-Gila*'s inception until 2003, fifty different humor magazines appeared in Malaysia (see Hamed 2003), some only briefly, others in two or three reincarnated versions after folding and then being picked up by new companies (Muliyadi 2000).

Five months after *Gila-Gila* was first published, *Gelihati* (Amused, or Tricked) came onto the scene, followed in quick succession by others. In 1984, Mishar left Creative Enterprise and formed Creative Masters, publishers of *Batu Api* (Instigator, 1984), *Komedi* (Comedy, 1985), and *Warta Jenaka* (Humorous news, 1987). The company was out of business by 1990, a time when the humor magazine market showed signs of being saturated.

Publishers reacted in different ways to the downswing. Black and Brown Publications, publishers of *Telatah* humor magazine, decided to issue an English-language magazine, *Flipside*, to gain that market for the predominantly Malay humor writers, while Creative Enterprise converted its *Humor* magazine to all-silent cartoons to bridge the language-bound audiences. Other magazines folded, an inevitable consequence of too many magazines with the identical concept (Zunar 1993).

Of those that remained, *Gila-Gila* and *Gelihati* were the most successful, perhaps because both had been around long enough to build loyal readerships and, in the case of *Gelihati*, because it was protected by the parent company, Kumpulan Karangkrat, Malaysia's third-largest publisher (Az 1993).

Ujang (Ibrahim Anon) played a big role in *Gila-Gila*'s success, and he later brought out his own humor magazine. Beginning in the early 1980s, Ujang's strips *Aku Budak Minang* (I am a Minang kid) and *Atuk* (Grandpa), both later made into television shows, revitalized *Gila-Gila* and Malaysian cartoons generally. Among his many strips was *Din Beramboi*, a popular work he introduced to *Gila-Gila* in 1987 and then brought to his own *Ujang Comics* (started in 1993), which, by 2000, had become the first humor magazine to surpass *Gila-Gila* in circulation. Through a series of misadventures, he lost *Ujang Comics* and other titles and companies he had started and was out of the industry—depressed, working odd

jobs as a street artist, and running a boating company. In 2010, Ujang attempted a comeback in animation (Siti Nursuraya 2010).

By the dawn of the twenty-first century, humor magazines were catering to particular audiences with specific themes: *Ujang* for teenagers; *Lanun* (founded by Ujang) on religion; *Mangga*, local entertainment; and *Cabai*, “exclusively for women” (Mulyadi 2007b, 127). The latter was particularly important because, before *Cabai*, women were almost invisible in the profession. Started on April 1, 1997, *Cabai* took the penname of one of Malaysia’s very few women cartoonists at the time, Sabariah Jais; the word *cabai*, which refers to a type of spicy chili pepper, was also used as the title of a women’s section in *Gila-Gila* (see Nik Naizi and M. Hafez 1993). After high school, Cabai drew two strips for *Gila-Gila*, *Jayah Sport* and *Tiga Dara*, the latter about three kampung girls who are portrayed as leaders. Although published by a separate corporation, Cabai Publications, the magazine was, in fact, part of Creative Enterprise. Jaafar Taib explained that, over the years, Creative Enterprise allowed its artists to pioneer new types of periodicals and then absorbed them (Jaafar 2000).

This tactic of specificity of content was necessary as circulations of humor magazines dwindled because of competition from new media and manga, the regional and Malaysian economic recession of 1997, and the overcrowded market. Companies began to protect themselves by venturing into other businesses; for example, Creative Enterprise became the most successful Malaysian publisher of paperback novels by 2000 (twenty-four titles yearly) and, in 2008, entered an agreement to produce animated works for broadcasters.

Malaysian humor magazines are rather bulky, with seventy-two to eighty-two pages, and they include the works of dozens of artists, usually in one-page spreads. Reasonably priced, they appeal to both men and women, featuring gender issues as a common recurring subject (see Provencher 1999; Provencher 2001, 187–203). Analyzing a group of Malay humor magazines, Provencher (1997, 31) listed the popular themes of Malay humor as:

Disapproval for speaking out; as much a matter of courtesy as it is censorship.  
Trying to be clever while misunderstanding something essential, yet succeeding in attaining one’s goal anyway.  
The forced and discomfiting “embarrassed impropriety” of the powerful elite.  
Peculiarities of other cultures; stereotypes.  
Preposterous things.  
The dilemma in Malay culture and humor.  
Character stereotypes—for example, smiles of characters (as many as sixteen types of smiles—cat’s smile, goat’s smile, king’s smile, etc.).  
Parody and satire directed at common types of persons and situations, rather than particular persons or incidents.

Elsewhere, Provencher (1999, 16–17) added the themes of relative social ranks and the right of people to protest against unjust, stingy rulers.<sup>3</sup>

*Gila-Gila*, as an exemplar of humor periodicals, has regular cartoon sections on women, teens, the workplace, Malayness, ethnic differences, and history. Although most of the content is entertaining, Rejabhad drew two features that were instructive: *Senyum Rakan Muda* (Young buddy smiles), meant to recruit young cartoonists by providing information on comic artists of the past and the tools of the profession, and *Hai KP* (Hello chief), used by him to answer letters, mainly from young readers. What sticks out about some of the content of the humor magazine is the sharpness of its criticism, a feature for which Malaysian culture has not been noted.

Why was there such an abundance of humor magazines at this time, and why are almost all of them in Bahasa Malaysia? Provencher (1997, 14) answered simply that humor is very important to Malays, found in the serious narrative genres of *sejarah* (traditional history) and *hikayat* (biography), in local dialects of everyday community life and specialized interregional and interethnic communication, in traditional Malay theater (*boria*, *bangsawan*, *Mak Yong*, *wayang kulit*), and in the classical dialect of royal courts dating back centuries.



Even today, Malay cartoonists draw on all of these “traditional registers of language” and genres. Jaafar Taib (2000) attributed the large number of humor magazines circulating at any given time to working people needing an escape, a form of stress release, and to would-be comic artists rushing into an industry they know nothing about. He said: “I cannot take it seriously that there are fifteen humor magazines because of the objectives of some of them. Few are established for a long time; a lot come and go, some for just a few months.”

Bahasa Malaysia is the language of almost all humor magazines in Malaysia, because it is the national language understood by all three dominant ethnic groups and because most cartoonists are ethnic Malay, Jaafar (2000) said. He pointed out that people in rural areas would not understand an English-language periodical such as *Flipside*, which existed briefly in the 1980s. “In *Gila-Gila*, we insert a page in English as it is the second language and its knowledge is vital with the rapid advancement of information technology,” Jaafar (2000) said. He surmised that there were not many Chinese cartoonists in Malaysia, perhaps because they cannot compete with comic books from Hong Kong and Taiwan, which have cornered the Chinese-language market.

Local comic book publication has had a seesaw existence in Malaysia, with most titles falling by the wayside rather quickly. The number of comic book publishers has usually been limited, as have the circulations of their titles. For example, Leonard Rifas (1984, 97) reported that in 1984, two Malaysian companies were publishing comic books, each with four to eight titles monthly, mostly in the historical and warrior-adventure genres. Their circulations were fifteen thousand each; they sold for the equivalent of fifteen U.S. cents. Additionally, two or three publishers brought out foto comics, made up of posed photographs with superimposed balloons containing dialogue. Rifas found a large number of imported comics from Great Britain, the United States, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (Rifas 1984: 97).

Muhamad Azhar Abdullah (2013, 310) called comics publishers of the early 1980s “daring,” singling out

Penerbitan Media Seni, Penerbitan Sri Cempaka, Raz Studio, and Komik Bayan. He said that Penerbitan Media Seni has been distinctive in bringing out titles of various genres, such as *Wak Dojer*, *Jati Tunggal*, *Pengembaraan Hassan dan Hussin*, *Mat Tarjan*, *Kapten Malaysia*, *Pahlawan Muda*, and more than 150 others. Most Media Seni comics imitate American fantasy stories, but with a local touch (Muhamad Azhar 2013, 311).

As at other times in Malaysian comic book history, there were attempts in the 1980s to bring public awareness to comics. One effort leading to a chain reaction was particularly successful. In January 1983, Daniel Chan began writing his weekly *New Straits Times* column on comics, *Comicscene*,<sup>4</sup> which introduced and reviewed foreign and local comics. Through the column, and with help from the company Books Distributors and the French embassy, Chan launched the first Malaysian Comics Convention in April 1984, attended by three hundred fans. Attendance more than tripled (to a thousand people) for the second convention in 1985, during which the first Malaysian *APAzine* was published, featuring the works of Malaysian amateur comics artists wishing to follow Marvel Comics style. It was at this convention that a local businessman, Alex Kong, conceived the idea to open a comics specialty shop, which he did in January 1986 in Kuala Lumpur. He opened two other shops later (Lim 1994a, 58).

A decade later, Malaysia had fifteen comics stores (eight in Kuala Lumpur). Unlike those in Singapore, comics specialty shops in Malaysia survived throughout the 1990s, partly because there was less competition and a bigger population from which to draw an audience, but mainly because the store owners had a gentleman’s agreement to settle prices, thus avoiding price wars and undercutting (Lim 1994a, 59). The stores primarily carried American superhero comic books.

The 1990s witnessed increasing professionalism in the comics industry, as well as a viable local comic book presence. In 1991, Persatuan Kartunis Selangor dan Kuala Lumpur (PEKARTUN) was set up with the goals of promoting cartooning, increasing the number

of outlets for cartoonists, and pushing for the gradual Malaysianization of newspaper strips and editorial cartoons. Started by Zunar (Zulkifli Anwar Ulhaque), Mulyadi Mahamood, and Lat, PEKARTUN was designed initially to break *Gila-Gila's* monopoly over cartoonists' rights and to serve as a middle party between the government and the public whom cartoonists sought to attract (Zunar 1993). The organization, with seventy-five to a hundred members, sponsored workshops and seminars, published a newsletter, *Peka*, helped clarify creators' rights, and worked on establishing a regional association for Southeast Asian comic artists. The latter had its first meeting in March 2000, attended by participants from Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Brunei. Among its goals were to establish good communication among the region's cartoonists and to mount traveling exhibitions of their works (Mulyadi 2000).

In the mid-1990s, Malaysian Chinese comic artists earned reputations publishing outside their home country in China, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. Later, some of these works were translated and published in Malaysia, such as Tatsun's *Lagenda Kuasa* in *Rileks* magazine; and Kenny Chua's *Sinba*, Octopus's *Misteri*, Tan Eng Huat's *X-box*, Yong Siew Yuen's *Master Hong*, and Totoro's *Raja Monyet*, all in *Gempak* magazine (Muhamad Azhar 2013, 315).

*Rileks* was one of a number of comics periodicals that grew out of the 1990s. A showcase of works by One Academy students, the anthology was a mix of strips, humor, comics, and local entertainment news. Among other new comics publishers were Mane Publications, which released four comics magazines in 1992 (*Waris*, *Silat*, *Megat*, and *Terawis*), and the Variapop Group, which, in 1995, issued a horror series based on its novel *Bercakap Dengan Jin*, including the titles *Penunggu Hantu*, *Tidur Di Rumah Bunian*, and *Langsuir*, all drawn by Sukma. Also in 1995, Creative Enterprise published the series *Komik Creative Klasik*, based on Malay folklore and legends; and *Nova*, an English-language comics magazine, appeared as well, offering space to local artists favoring Marvel and DC Comics styles. Also

published were spinoffs from animation, such as *Keluang Man*.

The chief comics publisher coming out of the 1990s was the Art Square Group, which started as a publishing and advertising company in 1994. Executive Director Chris Yew said that he sold the advertising agency for "much money" before the 1997 economic bust and started the comics company in 1998, because "I enjoy comics" (Yew 2012). That same year, the firm launched the semimonthly *Gempak* magazine, which took eighteen issues to finally turn a profit, after which it became one of the best-selling magazines in Malaysia (Fakhrul Anon 2004). *Gempak*, like other Art Square periodicals, has been a mix of comics (about 65 percent) and entertainment news with a strong manga influence in illustrative style, settings, characters, and plot lines. Media manager Haryati Mohamad Idris (2012), explained that Art Square started out with comics, then expanded to entertainment, and now deals only with comics because of stiff competition from a plethora of newly emerging entertainment magazines. An editor said that *Gempak* gives positive perceptions about comics to society, while introducing and respecting local talent (Fakhrul Anon 2004). Its success has been attributed to its emphasis on plot rather than cheap laughs, and its mixture of foreign and local content (Mahadevan 2005). Art Square issued four similar magazines (*Starz*, which has since closed; *Utopia* and *HYPe!*, in Malay; and *Comic King*, in Mandarin), and enthusiastically moved into the production of games/lifestyle/entertainment magazines and local and internationally copyrighted graphic novels; the sponsorship of an annual Malaysian Comics Carnival beginning in 2001; and the merchandising of a variety of products. By 2004, Art Square was publishing graphic novels, usually pulling comic stories out of its five magazines and publishing them as collections in graphic novel format (Muhamad Azhar 2009).<sup>5</sup> By mid-2012, the firm had published about five hundred graphic novels of this type, 60 percent of which were locally produced; the remainder were translated versions of foreign (manga) comic books. The most popular title is *Lawak Kampus*, by Keith (Chong Kah Hwee), which has appeared in



FIG. 8.8. Founder and executive director of the Art Square Group, Chris Yew. Kuala Lumpur, July 10, 2012. Photo by Xu Ying.

fourteen volumes. Keith (2012) said that he is free to come up with his own stories, which he has been doing for more than a decade.

An “aggressive promoter of comics” (Haryati 2012), Art Square purchased the reprint rights of Korean educational *manhwa* in an attempt to convince teachers and parents that comics were worthwhile reading; adapted their best artists’ works to the iPad platform to attract a tech-savvy audience; and held its own competition, Bakat Baru (New talent search), every two years to develop a talent pool. The works of winning competitors are published in Art Square periodicals.

Where do comic books and, by extension, graphic novels stand today relative to Malaysian popular culture? In the 2000s, comics converged with popular culture forms such as animation, television, music, theater, gaming, advertising, and merchandising. Animation shows were developed around and spawned comic books; a hip-hop group with its own label, Record, published a comic book featuring a character called Cicakman (Lizardman) (Muhamad Azhar 2009); Lat’s

*Kampung Boy* was brought to the stage; and advertising and merchandising increasingly aligned with cartoons and comics.

Malaysian comic books have joined the Internet, as artists and groups set up online associations and exhibition sites. Among these are the IACAScW, begun in September 2004, when a two-day Asian Comic Art Symposium/Workshop was held in Petaling Jaya;<sup>6</sup> and a Malaysian amateur artists group, started in 2000 by cartoonists who draw in manga style. Also new are independent publishers and cartoonists, some of whom coalesced after the 2006 Cedko Cartoonists’ Conference’s one-day event, “Cartoonin’ the World.” Out of that conference came a pocket book anthology, *Melting Pot*, containing twelve strips by people of various backgrounds: tax consultant David Lai; Allan Quah, who draws HeroVerse.com’s *Anywhere*; Mohd. Hafidz Mahpar (Prizm), deputy business editor of a daily newspaper and moderator of the IACAScW online community; Xanseviera (Haryati Mohd. Ehsan), publisher of his own manga comics magazine, *Cresto7*; Edward Mak; Ubder (Shahrin Iskandar); and Nurie (Nuriazam Ismail); among others including a property developer and a journalist. Of course, none of them worked in comics for a living.

Independent comics appeared as early as 2001, when *Urban Comics* was regularly published by a company with the same name and edited by Muhamad Azhar Abdullah. The Malay-language *Urban Comics* printed two short episodes on the front and back covers in full color, the rest in black and white. The stories were horror, science fiction, and adventure, some serialized. Originally, the comic book claimed to be “100% Komik,” probably distinguishing itself from Art Square magazines, which contain prose articles as well.

Another example of an independent comic is *Destination Unknown*, Special Comic World ’07 Edition (2007), which boasted of “featuring Malaysia’s answer to the Bionic Woman! + Wild, Wild East.” Twenty-four pages in black and white with a full-color cover, *Destination Unknown* contained two action stories set in modern times, using English and including slang phrases and





FIG. 8.9. Muhamad Azhar Abdullah's *Urban Comics* (no. 1, 2001), which helped launch the independent comics scene in Malaysia.

words such as “what the f—?!” and “goddamn,” seemingly out of place in an Islamic country. The cover shows the superheroine Maya triumphantly arm wrestling the Hulk. The stories are written by Prizm and drawn by Nurie, a freelance cartoonist who draws children’s books and also writes novels. In a foreword, Prizm implores readers to support the comic book by buying future issues, contributing fan art, and joining PeKomik (see below) and the online IACAScW, “whose members are among the country’s top amateur and professional comics creators.”

Independent cartoonists usually must find their own financial backers and publishers. Muhamad Azhar Abdullah, for example, was able to support his work with a grant from the government, which gives ten such awards annually. He then found a publisher, PTS

Millennia of Kuala Lumpur, to bring out his first graphic novel, *Liga Pendekar* (Legend of Pendekar, 2008). With more than a hundred pages and including character descriptions at the end, the book is “like a Justice League story,” Muhamad Azhar (2009) said, adding that he had pulled together a number of characters from different time periods in Malayan mythology, forming “twisted character stories.”

Out of occasional gatherings of budding cartoonists, an association was formed in 2007, Persatuan Penggiat Komik Malaysia (PeKomik), enabling cartoonists to “gather, also have exhibitions, and so forth” (Muhamad Azhar 2009). PeKomik’s goals of uniting comic artists, writers, publishers, and readers and generally elevating Malaysian comics had payoffs quickly; the organization established an annual comics festival beginning in

2008 as well as the Anugerah PeKomik awards, given in twenty-two categories dealing with comics and humor magazines. Muhamad Azhar (2009), the head of PeKomik, talked about the group's origins:

In 2006, we had a small gathering and decided to set up PeKomik. We submitted our proposal to the government and it took one and one-half years to get approval, finally in June 2008. We had a small convention of our members and others at the Art Gallery. It was a weekend event tied to the Kuala Lumpur Book Fair and drew 200–300 people. This year [2009], it will be a one-day affair with a comics market. We will concentrate on local comics, give an award, have Lat talk, etc. Lat, Jaafar Taib, and Reggie Lee are our advisers.

PeKomik has two hundred members, including seventy professional artists and writers as well as amateur comics workers and fans.

In 2012, PeKomik, with two collaborating groups, organized the Malaysian Games and Comic Convention (MGCCCon), a two-day event for creators and fans. MGCCCon organizer Angelia Ong (2012) thought that the fest was successful in awakening Malaysians to the facts that their country had an independent comics community and that local artists sometimes found jobs with huge American comics firms.

Independent artists also organize other activities to bring attention to cartooning. For example, in 2009, Muhamad Azhar Abdullah and Angelia Ong started Draw Night, monthly occasions when cartoonists (both practicing and budding) meet in each other's homes and "sit and sketch together" (Ong 2012). Such activity has also expanded to isolated Kuching in East Malaysia. Comics artist Sheldon Goh (2012) said of Draw Night: "The idea is to inject fun into our work. We meet in homes, the subway, malls, and a comic book shop. The young learn at these events and the groups are not just cartoonists in their thirties. All drawings from Draw Night are put on the wall at the comics shop."

Besides independent comic books, the other comic art form drawing some interest in Malaysia is the

graphic novel. Because graphic novels have a longer lifespan than comic books, bookstores "like them even though they put them in the children's section," according to Muhamad Azhar Abdullah (2009). Some recent titles include *Mahathir Mohamad: An Illustrated Biography* (MPH Publishing, 2008) by E. Yu, who also operates stalls at food courts; *Scary Ever After* (MPH Publishing, 2009) by John Ho, a collection of horror and dark fantasy stories; and *Where Monsoons Meet: A People's History* (Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2008) by engineers Lee Khok Mui and Low Swee Heong and architect Choo Foo Yong. Text versions of *Where Monsoons Meet* came out in 1979 and 1987. In 2012, Amir Muhamad, writer/director/publisher of Matahari Publications, announced that the firm's Buku Fixi series of nonfiction novels about daring, urban crime will be adapted to graphic novels. Titles include *Invasi*, *Zombie Joy*, *Sitora Harimou*, and *Jadian*. Muhamad Azhar Abdullah (2009) pointed out that not many graphic novels are published in Malaysia because "people think only Marvel and DC magazines are comics, not these [graphic novels] that we do."

Local comic books and comics magazines come and go in Malaysia, some with very short runs. Three important publishers of these works are PTS Media, Moy, and Karang kraf. During its initial years (2002–2003), PTS published motivational books, adding graphic novels in 2008. By mid-2012, the company had released more than eighty titles at the rate of two to four monthly, according to Muhamad Azhar Abdullah (2012). Most of the books deal with aliens, the future, or humorous superhero themes and are "Muslim in nature." Moy started in the early 1990s with Ujang's self-titled cartoon magazine *Ujang Comics*, which it still publishes, along with *Apo?* The company has not entered the graphic novel market. Karang kraf, a large publisher of newspapers and women's magazines, has issued three humor comics magazines since the 1980s (*Gelihati* in the 1980s, *Jom*, and *G-3*) and the Imprint Comix 21 series, closely resembling graphic novels. Inaugurated in 2010, Imprint Comix 21 has included action, love, and fantasy titles, including *Saga* (about Proton car racing), *Burger* (a

love story featuring a man who sells hamburgers), and a contemporary story about a mystical sword (Muhamad Azhar 2012). Other recent comics publishing companies include Telaga Biru, specializing in comic books for Muslim children (*Ana Muslim* and *Muslim Teen*); Esquire Publications, with a line of biographies (*P. Ramlee*, *Onn Jaafar*, *Tun Abdul Razak*, *Munsyi Abdullah*, *Pembunuhan Birch*, and *Pendita Za'ba*); Media Seni (*Budya* by Sa'ari, *Kalong Pendita* by A. Ghafar Bahari, *Ilmu Hantu Kembali* by Ishari Ramli, *Wak Dojer* by Hussain Sa'ad, and *Kucing Hitam Penculik*); Noradz Travel and Services with *Komikoo*; and KRU Studios, which published the above-mentioned *Cicakman*. Chinese publishers include G. Apple Studio (*Ge Mei Lia*), Hup Lick Publishing (*Genius World*), Penerbitan Pelangi, and UPH.

Since the 1980s, comic books have had to compete with pirated titles from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Japan, which have been plentiful in Malaysia. As Muliyadi (2000) explained: "A pirate company takes a book from elsewhere without paying for it, translates it their way poorly and prints it." At least ten pirate comics publishers operate in the country, although only four or five account for most titles. Eric Wan, managing director of Star Bookstore, explained that "the piracy is done in the open; they have their own printing presses. There is no control of piracy. The enforcement officers know of these publications all too well. It's too troublesome to enforce. And, the comics industry is too small for them to be concerned" (Wan 2009). The Home Ministry does monitor the comics' content to weed out scenes that might compromise Malaysian values, but most often the ministry does not forbid their actual publication. The Taiwanese and Japanese companies whose titles are pirated also are complacent about the situation, according to Wan (2009): "Tong Li [a large Taiwanese publisher, which itself was a major pirate company before 1992] does not take action about their works being pirated. Local publishers steal Tong Li's books and republish them here. The Japanese and Taiwanese will not worry about copyright violation in Malaysia as the market is too small. They know who is doing the piracy but take no action."

The pirated comic books are aimed at the rental market, largely controlled by Star Bookstore, a Taiwanese-owned chain with forty Malaysian outlets. At one time, the company had eighty comic book store franchises, but, according to Wan, the Chinese population in Malaysia is decreasing and interest in comics has dropped. Star prefers to purchase its stock from local pirate companies, which charge four and a half ringgit (about US\$1.35) per title, because secondhand comics bought directly from Taiwan cost fifteen to twenty ringgit each. Wan (2009) said that buying new books for the rental stores is prohibitively expensive. Altogether, the store receives fifty comic books monthly, and everything the local pirate companies produce is automatically delivered. The store this author visited carried more than fifty thousand titles.

The rental system works in the following fashion. Customers (predominantly Chinese, because Malays generally do not rent comics) initially become Star members and deposit fifty ringgit, from which they can draw each time they rent a book. Some have VIP accounts, allowing for special privileges such as reserving books or renting entire series. If readers rent for use on the premises, they pay only 70 percent of the take-home rental fee; if they rent by the week, they pay 25 percent of the book's cost. Star stores occasionally have contests and other promotional events. Wan (2009) said that, unlike rental shops in Japan and Korea, which have adequate seats and other comforts, Malaysian shops are devoid of lounges and sometimes even Internet access. "Living quarters are cramped in Japan and Korea," he added, "but in Malaysia, everyone has a [relatively spacious] house."

Following a global trend, the Malaysian comic book industry has been strongly affected by Japanese manga. Pirated manga make up a substantial portion of rental store inventories, while legally published Japanese comic books fill the shelves of the main bookstores such as Kinokuniya and Popular Book Company. Further, manga technique, style, and atmosphere are very evident in much of the local fare, particularly Art Square comics, which use a linear style with "flat color and tonal values,"



and Moy Publications' *Ujang Comics*, *Apo?*, and *Blues Selamanya* (Mulyadi 2003a, 198).

It is very tempting for young cartoonists to imitate manga when they see the financial opportunities manga offers, compared to local comics. They also have difficulty avoiding manga, with the Japanese government sponsoring awards for the best manga drawings by Malaysians and other Southeast Asians; events such as the annual Comic Fiesta, catering chiefly to local amateur cartoonists and cosplayers; and manga exhibitions at universities and colleges.

There are few local comic strips in Malaysian daily newspapers, a situation that has not changed much over the years. For example, looking at eighteen Malaysian dailies in 1973, this author found that of the total twenty-one strips, only six (all Chinese) were locally drawn. On Sunday, *Berita Minggu* carried *Tok Misai* by Rousen and *Keluarga Si-Mamat* by Lat, in addition to the syndicated strips *Nancy*, *Batman*, and *Tarzan* (Lent 1973, 10–12). Not much had changed a decade later when Rifas (1984, 97) reported an absence of local strips. For example, a November 1983 issue of the *New Straits Times* offered *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century*, *Star Wars*, *Bringing Up Father*, *Blondie*, *Ally Oop*, and *Bugs Bunny*. Two local strips appeared between 1982 and 1984: *Abu*, the first serialized strip in Malaysia and Singapore, and *Guli Guli* (Marbles); both appeared in the *New Sunday Times* and were done by Lim Kok Wing. In Lim's comics, characters disagreed but never disavowed the bonds that united them. Lim eventually moved to a career in advertising, from which he became wealthy. Later, he started his own university, the Lim Kok Wing University of Creative Technology.

By 1993, the situation had improved slightly. On August 7, following a sample taken on that day, the *New Straits Times* printed eleven U.S. strips and *Tok Guru* by Sofiyan Yahya (the following day's Sunday *New Straits Times*, in its eight-page, full-color funnies section, was devoid of local strips, instead featuring seventeen non-Malaysian ones). *Utusan Malaysia* carried one joke, "Senyum Kambing," on the front page, plus a comics page, "Senyum Pagi," with four strips, and *Harian Metro* had a page of six local strips. *Berita Harian* used no

local strips, nor did the *Malay Mail* in its two-page, twelve-strip section. The *Star* also printed two pages with a total of twelve strips, but only G. W. Kee's *Kee's World* was local. Kee's *It's a Durian Life* was the only Malaysian-drawn strip among the six pages of cartoons in the August 8 *Sunday Star*. Kee began as an editorial cartoonist for the *Star* in 1981. In the early 1980s, he created his two strips, which "depict the social reflections of the Malaysian Society" (Muhammad Shahriar 2008, 483) and tackle social issues with wit and humor. Kee's characters are nameless and speechless.

In the weekend sections of four main dailies in January 2009, this author found that the Malay-language press emphasized local strips over foreign ones. *Berita Harian* used five local strips in Malay and in color: *Hijrah Kasih* by Zoy; *A.L.A.M.* by E. G.; *Cerita Atuk* by Deen; *Celoteh Kaum Bapa* by Mamat; and *Mat Rempit* by Yon. No non-Malaysian strips were included. All eight strips in *Utusan Malaysia* were Malay-language and in color: *Aimie Amiera* by Rizalman; *Junurunding* by Kia; *Mangsa* by Hafiz; *Jusoh.Net* by Acai; *Din Burger* by Nuek; *Baran* by Ajio; *Haru Biru* by Alin; and *Tun Fatimah* by Zaharuddin Sarbini. Most strips in both newspapers were humor related, although romance, adventure, and ancient Malay stories figured as well. In the weekend sections of the *Star* and the *New Straits Times*, only Kee's *World* was local; the rest were syndicated. The *Times* carried one manga strip. In a weekday issue of the *New Straits Times*, *One-on-One* by Ridzwan A. Rahim and *Billie & Saltie* by the Singaporean cartoonist Cheah were the only non-U.S. strips.

Taking Malaysian comic art as a whole, an unexpected phenomenon (particularly in humor magazines) is the degree of freedom that cartoonists have had in a country not always known for its tolerance of criticism. The atmosphere was very different from the 1950s through the 1970s, when cartoonists trod very cautiously, avoiding drawing caricatures of officials and touching on nationally sensitive issues (Bahasa Malaysia as the national language, citizenship policy vis-à-vis the Chinese, the privileges of the sultans, and laws favoring ethnic Malays).

Lat and others acknowledged that cartoonists' freedom to express themselves broadened considerably in the 1980s. Provencher and Jaafar Omar (1988) showed in a number of examples how humor magazines lampooned the dilemmas of the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in the 1980s as it dealt with Malay nationalism, Islamic fundamentalism, and modernization. Discussing specific topics, Provencher and Jaafar said that Malay history and legend get much attention, that other ethnic groups figure regularly in all humor magazines, and that political satire is "very common," except in *Komedi. Gila-Gila* had a regular column called Dilema Melayu (the title itself a swipe at Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's controversial book *The Malay Dilemma*), and, in one issue of *Toyol*, the agriculture minister was satirized. The authors added: "UMNO party politics are commented upon, as are corruption, the 'Look East' policy, prison conditions, and the military, as well as (in a very sly fashion) the powers of royalty, and the pressures to conform" (Provencher and Jaafar 1988).

Violence-laden comic books, the bane of former prime minister Mahathir and Islamic fundamentalists, got some footing in Malaysia in the 1980s; most came from abroad. An anomaly among the usually tame local comics was *Neraka*, produced by M. A. Jaya (possibly in the 1980s), which aimed to teach children to behave by frightening them with traumatizing, gory images of hell. Paul Gravett and Peter Stanbury (2008, 28) described *Neraka's* story: "Two cloaked messengers from God take the Prophet Muhammad, represented only as a circle containing his name in traditional Thuluth calligraphy, on a guided tour of the fiery pits of Neraka (hell) to see how the punishment varies to fit the crime. Some sinners have their tongues or limbs cut off, stakes and pincers applied to their genitals or boiling water poured over their heads. Others endure a giant steam iron searing the flesh off their back, all shown in nauseating detail."

Overall, comic book artists draw much more carefully today than those doing humor magazines and political cartoons, partly because comics are perceived by government authorities as children's media, which is more tightly controlled. The Kementerian Dalam Negeri

(Ministry of Home Affairs) strictly enforces regulations concerning characters' sexuality. Gan Sheuo Hui (2011, 172) gave examples of prohibited content: "Kissing scenes are not allowed, nor is any other behavior that could be erotically stimulating. Kissing a child is permitted but not kissing between a man and a woman. Pointing a gun at someone's head is definitely prohibited, although depicting a gun is permissible. 'Improper expressions,' such as cursing others to die, are also not allowed. Clothing that is too tight is not permitted."

In the 1990s, some political cartoonists went so far as to parody nationally sensitive issues. For example, Zunar said that he poked fun at the feud between the government and royalty (1993), and Deen of *Gelihati* felt that sensitive topics were fair game, if handled lightly (1993). Zunar recommended that critical cartooning be approached with caution and politeness, saying: "One must criticize obliquely and be prepared to respond to ministers and others who are criticized. If I am prepared to respond to the minister, then it is easier for him and for me" (Zunar 1993).

Zunar, whose career began on *Gila-Gila* in 1983, is singled out, along with Lat, as a cartoonist who expresses himself rather freely. Muliyadi Mahamood (2000) said that whereas Zunar is direct in his approach, Lat is subtle. Zunar faced the wrath of the government from 2009 to 2012, when his political cartoon books were seized and banned and he was arrested, threatened, and locked up for two days under the Security Act. He reacted by compiling additional critical cartoon anthologies and filing suits against the government (Zunar 2009–2014). In 2011, he was given the Cartoonists Rights Network International award for courage, at about the same time the government refused his request to lift the ban on his cartoons.

Some writers have offered reasons why cartoonists, apart from cases such as Zunar's, have generally been given leeway by the authorities. Among them are:

1. The Malay community's powerful political position in the country makes it less likely that the government will censor Malay humor magazines;

2. The freedom is rooted in history, in that cartooning is replacing dying traditional arts (*boria*, *wayang kulit*, and *bangsawan*), which allowed the public to vent grievances against the leadership through humor (Provencher and Jaafar 1988; Jir 1989);
3. Many Malaysians consider cartoons a children's medium, and so the authorities do not treat them as a political threat (Provencher 1999, 18);
4. Cartoons and humor magazines are published in colloquial dialects that are almost illegible to many Malaysians (Provencher 1999, 18); and
5. Cartoons are used and tolerated as a means to "cope with the stresses of multi-racial urban life," as Suhaini Aznam (1989, 42) hypothesized: "If humour is the fine art of escape, Malaysians have unconsciously refined the art form. . . . Malaysians laugh so they will not punch each other. Humour allows Indians, Chinese and Malays to laugh at themselves, so they will feel less the sting of others' racial barbs. Here, humour is used to highlight stereotypes, and then to destroy them; to whittle away racial differences and reach a common, sympathetic cord."

Just as the freedom to cartoon has improved since the 1980s, so have other aspects of comic art. Undoubtedly, cartooning has taken on more professional dimensions, with the establishment of PEKARTUN and PeKomik, annual comics conferences, government grants to cartoonists, and comics awards as well as heretofore missing public acceptance of comic art. The many honors given to Lat attest to the elevation of respect the government and people have for comics. But, as with anything else, not everything is rosy. Creators at the 2008 PeKomik National Illustrations Conference, for example, were discouraged that publishers don't recognize their art, claiming that often only the writer is credited on comic book covers. Cartoonists are bewildered by copyright issues, as illustrators, publishers, and printers all interpret the law differently. Describing the situation in 1993, Zunar showed how entangled the copyright issue has been:

When a publisher uses your cartoons, you can negotiate whether you want to hold the copyright. If you decide yes,



FIG. 8.10. *Cabai* (May 1997) took its name from the pseudonym of female cartoonist Sabariah Jais.

you're paid a royalty. If no, and the publisher wants to hold the copyright, then the publisher pays you an honorarium. The agreement the cartoonist and publisher work out becomes the law. But additionally, the publisher has publisher's right. Thus, a cartoonist can hold the copyright but the publisher still has rights. And the practice is different from the law in that when a publisher uses a cartoonist's work, he assumes he owns all of it, has all the rights. (Zunar 1993)

M. K. Megan and Koh Lay Chin (2009), while calling for a cartoonists union, said that most comics artists do not know their legal rights.

As is common in much of Asia, Malaysia has not yielded many women cartoonists. Of the seventeen that cartoonist and comics historian Noorhazalen Saad has identified since independence (1957), she said that only seven succeeded commercially—Nora Abdullah (Malaysia's first woman cartoonist, an independent who was published by a Singapore company), Cabai (Sabariah





FIG. 8.11. *Rojak*, completed by Sarah Joan Mokhtar during a twenty-four-hour comics creation challenge in 2006. Courtesy of Sarah Joan Mokhtar.

Jais, for *Gila-Gila*), Leen Mafea (Noorhazalen Saad, for *Ujang*), Sarah Joan (Sarah Joan Mokhtar, for *Ujang*), Kaoru (Liew Yee Teng, for *Gempak*), Suraya Jon (for *G-3* and *Apo?*), and Margaret (for an unnamed Tamil periodical) (Noorhazalen 2012).

Leen Mafea (originally Mafia; changed to Mafea, an acronym for Malaysian Artist for Excellent Art) drew mainly in the 1990s, usually about her students or kampung (village) life. She stopped most of her cartooning in 2002 to take up teaching and pursue a doctorate, writing a dissertation on the history of Malaysian women cartoonists. Sarah Joan, who began her cartooning career at the age of fifteen, drew a strip, *Awek Aspuri*, for *Ujang* until 2001, when she left to pursue her university education. Upon her return to comics in 2006, Sarah Joan wrote the short story comic *Rojak*, based on her experiences as an Irish Malay girl at a Muslim female boarding school, and an ongoing series, *My Spy*. In recent years, Sarah Joan has become more independent, experimenting with various styles and themes while hybridizing Asian and Western influences

(Sarah Joan 2011). Kaoru (born in 1982) is *Gempak's* leading shōjō manga artist, having begun work at the magazine in 2000. Gan (2011, 164) called Kaoru “atypical” because she is a “Chinese-Malaysian artist who uses a Japanese pen name and who publishes her works in the Malay language for a largely Malay audience.” Prolific, Kaoru has published four one-volume compilations of her stories, the eight-volume *Helios Eclipse*, and the ongoing series *Maid Maiden*. Because Malaysians like “very, very short romance stories,” she keeps her comics within sixteen pages, using trendy drawing styles. Kaoru sees no real difference between male and female cartoonists at Art Square: “Like all others, I am rushing to meet deadlines” (2012).

Commercially, making a living solely from comics or humor magazines is extremely rare, and most cartoonists have full-time jobs outside the profession. Recently, some comics artists have found assignments on foreign books issued by DC and Marvel, while others have moved to advertising, animation, or graphic design. Publishers such as Creative Enterprise and Art Square benefit from the sale of spin-off products (T-shirts, calendars, postcards, memo pads, towels, pens, and key chains), but it is not known if the artists working for these publishers share in the subsidiary profits.

The marketability of comic books and humor magazines in Malaysia is mainly hindered by language limitations. The deteriorating English-language skills of Malaysians only compounds the problem; most cartoonists are not able to work effectively in that language, thus hurting their chances of selling their works overseas. However, cartoonists working exclusively in Malay or Chinese cannot reach even all of Malaysia, and the existing market has become saturated. Competition from imported American, Japanese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong comic books, many of which are pirated, has made the viability of local comics even more problematic.

Concluding, the development of comic art in Malaysia has been, to use a metaphor, brilliant gold in the 1960s and 1970s, tarnished brass at other times in the past, and hovering between high-quality silver and low-quality gold today.

## Notes

1. Political cartoons occasionally were published in the Malay press in the 1920s (see Muliyadi 2003b). William Roff (1967, 157–66) noted that Malay-language magazines carried cartoons and humor texts in the 1930s. In the Chinese-language press, *Chong Shing Yit Pao*, published in Singapore, introduced political cartoons in its third week of existence, on September 11, 1907. Anti-Qing Dynasty in orientation, they were crudely drawn but “sometimes quite effective” (Chen 1967, 99). Among English-language newspapers, at least the *Straits Echo* and the *Times of Malaya* used social commentary and political cartoons.

2. Other humor magazines may have appeared before or shortly after *Ha Hu Hum*. Former minister of agriculture and secretary of the dominant United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) political party Tan Sri Sanusi Junid said that he published *Mat Jenin* before *Gila-Gila*’s establishment (Sanusi 2000).

3. Provencher analyzed aspects of humor magazines on other occasions: the covers, themes, readers’ letters, short stories, poetry, riddles, news, narratives, and dialogues of six humor magazines in 1986 (Provencher and Jaafar 1988, 87–99), and humorous texts and interpretations relative to education, Islamic reform, general economic problems, and politics in seven humor magazines, 1986 to 1989 (Provencher 1990, 1–25).

4. Other comics columns appear in newspapers. The *Star* carries two columns, one on Sunday dealing with manga, another on Friday concerning Marvel comics (Mohd. Hafidz 2009).

5. Art Square does not accept stories for graphic novels that have not been published first in its magazines. Chief Editor Chin Sau Lim (2012) explained that stories are compiled into graphic novels because the company’s magazines only have a two-week shelf life.

6. The author was coorganizer and cochair of this event.

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The first known cartoon used in a Burmese newspaper was drawn by the British commissioner of Burma's railways, and, as so often was the case with the subject matter of colonial presses, it took exception with local people and their doings. In that cartoon, published in the *Rangoon Times* in 1912,<sup>1</sup> Martin Jones, using the pen name Myauk (*myauk phyu*, "white monkey," was what the locals called the British), belittled a local woman who attended a party for Westerners (Aung Zaw 2003).

Jones and other amateur British painters such as physics professor Kenneth Martin Ward and the principal of the Teacher's College, E. G. N. Kinch, were instrumental in founding the Burma Art Club (BAC), with the purpose of promoting Western-style drawing and painting (including cartooning) to the Burmese.<sup>2</sup> The first local cartoonists to receive instruction at the BAC were Ba Gale (Shwe Ta Lay) and Ba Gyan.

Ba Gale actually had begun his career before the club was founded, publishing a cartoon in the *Rangoon College Annual Magazine* in 1917. He was the first artist to draw a cartoon in the Burmese language, in *Thuriya* (Sun magazine) in March 1917. After he contributed his work to the *Rangoon Times* and was duly paid, Ba Gale set about making cartooning his chosen profession, and soon he became a regular contributor to local newspapers. The editor of the *Rangoon Times* wrote of his satisfaction with Ba Gale: "It is recognized by all hands that U Ba Gale's cartoons are excellent. Certainly, there is nobody who compares with him in Burma today as a pictorial commentator on current events" (quoted in Aung Zaw 2003).

In the early stages of Burmese cartooning, it was difficult for some sectors of the population to properly interpret the drawings, as Aung Zaw (2003) explained:

Many people unfamiliar with the genre thought the figures looked too much like goblins, which further detracted from their appeal. To gain popular acceptance, Ba Gale's cartoons were often accompanied by long captions or described poetically by editors. During British rule, captions often appeared in English. Respected Burmese literary figure Sayagyi Thakin Kodaw Hmaing edited *The Sun* and

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## Chapter 9

# Myanmar





FIG. 9.1. Ba Gale's parody of local "sycophants" carrying the British into the temple so that they do not have to obey the custom of removing one's shoes before entering a holy place. From U Thaung. *A Journalist, a General and an Army in Burma* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1995), 8.



FIG. 9.2. A Ba Gyan comic in the early 1950s. From Wikipedia, "Ba Gyan."

wrote many captions for Ba Gale, contributing to the public's appreciation of the cartoonist.

Although his cartoons often appeared in English-language periodicals, Ba Gale was not a bootlicker of the colonialists; he regularly parodied British officials in Burma and, at times, called for independence. He also poked fun at local politicians, especially those he singled out as opportunists or "seatgrabbers" in Parliament, and

native Burmese people and their customs. Aung Zaw (2003; see also Thaung 1995) gave an example of the latter: "When some protested the British habit of wearing shoes inside temples, Ba Gale sketched a parody of those who helped carry the British masters on their backs to and from the temple"; thus, Ba Gale depicted the local people as "sycophants of the imperialists." He received some flack from the British, particularly after portraying Saya San, the leader of a peasant uprising in 1930, as a hero, but he was never jailed. Ba Gale also gained fame as a movie actor and director.

Ba Gyan, a contemporary of Ba Gale's whose artistic career began at the BAC, was more prominent in the 1930s, when his political cartoons took sides with the nationalists (Lintner 1991, 32). According to Aung Zaw (2003), some critics felt that Ba Gale's tough stance against the British softened when Ba Gyan came onto the scene. Ba Gyan spared no one in his attacks, after independence directing his sharp sarcasm at Prime Minister U Nu as well as communist leader Than Tun. He refused to compromise his impartiality, as Aung Zaw (2003) related: "[W]hen Burma faced civil war and political turmoil in the 1950s, U Nu asked Ba Gyan to come to see him. . . . The PM recognized Ba Gyan's influence and wanted him to draw cartoons that exhibited peace and unity. Ba Gyan replied that he was too busy to make the meeting."

Multitalented, Ba Gyan illustrated children's magazines; photographed professionally; created Burma's first animated films, *Kye Taungwa* and *Athuya*, in 1934 and 1935, respectively; and wrote novels under the penname Thonnya (Zero). He is credited with drawing the first

Burmese comic book, *Ko Pyoo and Ma Pyone*, in 1937. Ba Gyan's array of characters appeared in various political and humor panels, such as Phauk Seit in *Thuriya*, Zayakati in *Hanthawaddy*, and Hyyauk Seik, who was later drawn wearing the clothing of a holy mendicant, reflecting Ba Gyan's grief after his wife's death in 1948. Prior to World War II, he began to exhibit cartoons on lanterns and paper on his street of residence during the annual Tazaung Daing festival; the exhibition was continued until 1997, decades after Ba Gyan's death in 1953. It was revived in 2010, on what is now U Ba Gyan street in Yangon (Myat Kyi La Thein 2011).

As the number of newspapers and magazines in Burma proliferated from 44 in 1911 to 103 in 1921 and more than 200 at the end of the 1930s, cartoons and other cultural media forms "surfaced not only as low-cost sources of information but also as avenues of public discourse, art, and entertainment, and as increasingly potent purveyors of role models, gender identities, ethical norms and values and other icons of identity" (Ikeya 2008, 1282). For example, according to Ikeya (2008, 1299–1300), cartoons in the 1920s and 1930s sometimes "exposed the dislocation felt on the part of Burmese men by immigration of foreign men that colonialism entailed." One six-panel comic strip in the October 10, 1925, issue of *Deedoke* showed such marginalization of Burmese men and exploitation of local women, beginning with

a picture of a Burmese woman flatly rejecting what appears to be a marriage proposal from a British man. She says, "You think you're worthy of me?" Her mother, however, entreats her daughter to accept the foreigner's proposal, which prompts the daughter to ask why. The mother, envisioning the foreigner with his foreign servants, replies that marrying him will mean that they get to be chauffeured in cars. The daughter evidently accepts the foreigner's proposal, because, explains the caption next to the couple, "she is opportunistic." Just as she gives birth to the foreigner's child, however, a servant instructs her, "Go! Go! The wife from the home country is coming!" . . . The cartoon concludes with the Burmese "wife" in tears and with the

following caption: "Oh, the impermanent nature of life." (Ikeya 2008, 1299–1300)

Some pioneering cartoonists, such as Ba Gyan and Hein Sung, continued to ply their profession after independence in 1948, joined by others, who, according to Bertil Lintner (1991, 32), "often saw their role as the public's watchdog, armed with pen and wit, to ward against corruption and abuse of power." At the time, some cartoonists adapted to forms other than political cartoons and strips, as cartoon books and comic books grabbed their attention.

Periodicals loaded with cartoons and comics became popular in the 1950s, providing the major entertainment in an age without television as a competitor. Cartoonist U Sein (1993) verified the popularity of cartoons when he started his career in 1952, saying that there were many newspapers and periodicals and that each had cartoonists; some were staff members, but most worked as freelancers. Because it was necessary "to pave our own way," Aung Shein, in 1953, started what was likely the first Burmese magazine—the monthly *Popular*—to serve as an outlet for local comics.<sup>3</sup> He followed up with another monthly called *Modern* (Aung Shein 1993). Others, such as *Cartoon Nyung-Paung*, *Phopyonecho*, *OK*, *Maung Gabar*, *Kalay*, *Padaythar*, and *Lote Tharr Sar Saung*, came out in quick succession.

When he launched *Popular*, Aung Shein (1993) said that comics were not popular in Burma—"the audience did not have a taste for cartoons"—but this changed by 1956 and 1957, and some cartoon/comics magazines began appearing as often as twice monthly. Aung Shein's main characters were U Shan Sar and U Dein Daung. He said that, over the years, he developed characters like "a Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson in our own culture, another who was a miser, still another who was like Tarzan" (1993). Aung Shein, considered by his colleague Ngwe Kyi (1996, 29) as the person who "succeeded in making strip cartoons a fully recognized cartoon form" in Burma, also drew a very popular strip that depicted Burmese women's lives. Called *Kyemon Khin* (a woman's name), the strip also featured Khin Maung Thet Cho Oo,

who constantly wooed the main character. *Kyemon Khin* first appeared in 1957, the same year as the establishment of the newspaper *Kyemon*, in which it appeared. Other popular comics artists of the period were Than Kywe and Pe Thein; among favorite characters were U Seit Nyo, Myuk Nyo, U Kat See, and Sar Shar-Dane Dong. Pe Thein's fame came from his magazine comic strips. There was even a Burmese version of Superman, Myint Swe's Bo Pu Cho, whose chest was adorned with the letter *pu* from the Burmese alphabet (Nyein Ei Ei Htwe 2012). Thittsar Ni, a writer of children's stories, said that the comics of the 1950s taught children "right from wrong, how to play fairly and other important life lessons" (quoted in Nyein Ei Ei Htwe 2012).

Newspaper and magazine strips (*satarit kartun*, "strip cartoons"), as already indicated, existed before World War II, a notable example being Hein Sung's four-panel *Akya Paing Dhaw Nga Khwe* (Clever Nga Khwe) in the newspaper *Myanma Alin*. Other early strips were *Goot Htaw* (a girl's name), drawn by Ba Gyan in the *Yuwaddy Journal*, and *Khin Maung Tunt* (a boy's name), by Pe Thein in *Myanma Alin* (Ngwe Kyi 1996, 29). Noteworthy as a publisher of cartoons when it was launched in 1957 was the *Mirror*, which featured the international news-related works of Ba Htwe, Pe Thein's serious news cartoons, those of Hein Sung on film and the creative industries, and Aung Shein's comic strip featuring the character *Kyemon Khin* (Zon Pann Pwint 2011). A few years earlier in 1951, Pe Thein's daily cartoon *Pyidhu Kyemon* (People's mirror) in the newspaper *Hanthawaddy* prompted other dailies to have an interest in their own cartoons. As Ngwe Kyi (1996, 27) wrote, before 1951, newspapers carried cartoons weekly or monthly, but after that year they printed daily cartoons.

Myo Thant (2005) has categorized the 1950s and 1960s as the first of four distinct postindependence periods of cartooning in Burma. In 1962, cartoonists and other artists had to heel to strict state control after the military seized power. This restrictive status remained in effect until 1988. Nevertheless, a substantial number of prominent cartoonists came onto the scene in the 1960s. Cartoonists from that era who remained famous

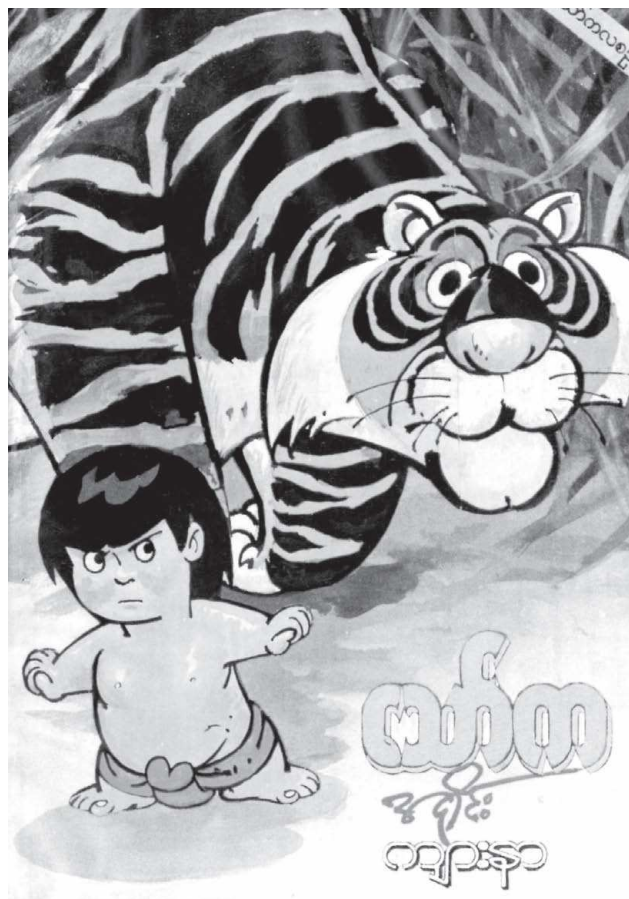


FIG. 9.3. Cover of Thaw Ka's *Ah Yang* in early 1990s. Courtesy of Thaw Ka.

for decades include Mye Zar, Ngwe Kyi, Maung Maung, Thaw Ka, Chit Shwe, Khin Shwe, Thu Ta, Myint Soe Lay, Maung Wunna, and Kan Chun. For the most part they drew comic books but also worked in other branches of cartooning, created at least one long-lasting character, and dealt mainly with humor, which remains the mainstay of comic books and comic strips in Burma. Unlike in some parts of the world, Burmese comics creators both write and draw their books, and often self-publish.

In 1993, when this author interviewed veteran cartoonists who were active during the 1950s and 1960s, invariably they said that the comics scene had not changed much in the intervening quarter century, save for a bit more freedom. Most of them kept drawing the same characters for their entire careers and were identified by them. Thaw Ka (1993) nurtured *Ah Yang* (Wild one),<sup>4</sup> a jungle-themed comic book with a tinge of "philosophical adventure," which he explained brought in patriotism, human values, and religion. With a circulation of two thousand, *Ah Yang* appealed to adults



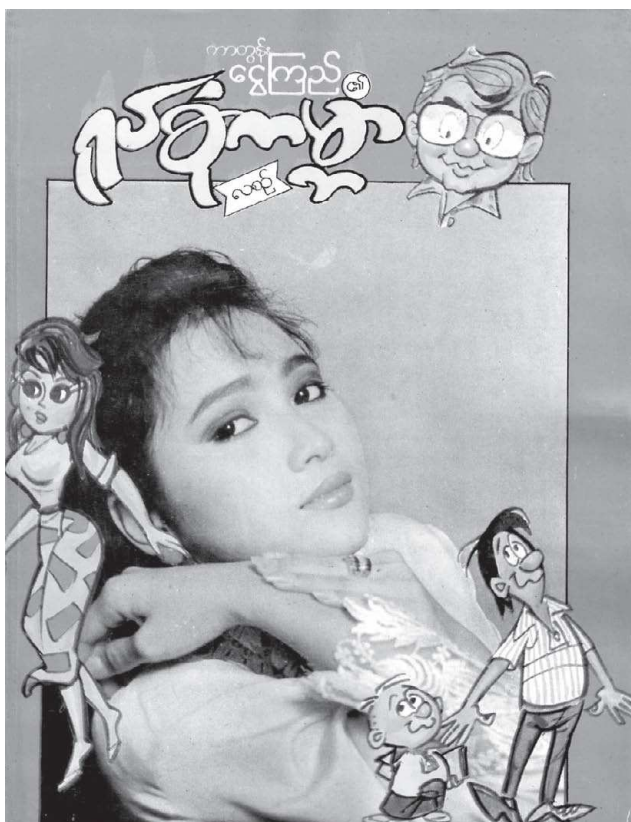


**FIG. 9.4.** U Ngwe Kyi worked in various aspects of comic art; he produced a series of comic books featuring the same character, printed in different sizes. Courtesy of U Ngwe Kyi.

and children alike because of its embedded philosophy. Thaw Ka, an avid fan of the forest dweller in Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, fashioned his character after Mowgli, with the difference that Ah Yang had a "sense of patriotism and natural instinct to promote other people's welfare," especially that of the underdog (Hpyo Wai Tha 2012). The story was set during British rule, and the character was "someone who fights against the mistreatment of the former rulers and their bureaucrats, especially supporting those living in the countryside" (Hpyo Wai Tha 2012).

Khin Shwe (1993), who drew strips mainly for magazines such as *Thadin*, singled out *Pee Nhyet* (Small) as one of his main works; he said that during his early career he drew four strips and dozens of other cartoons for magazines every month. Khin Shwe's characters were distinguishable by the traditional Burmese costumes they wore. Maung Maung (1993) was primarily noted for the children's cartoon story *Pohtaw the Hunter*; he also published the magazine *Owl Monthly*.

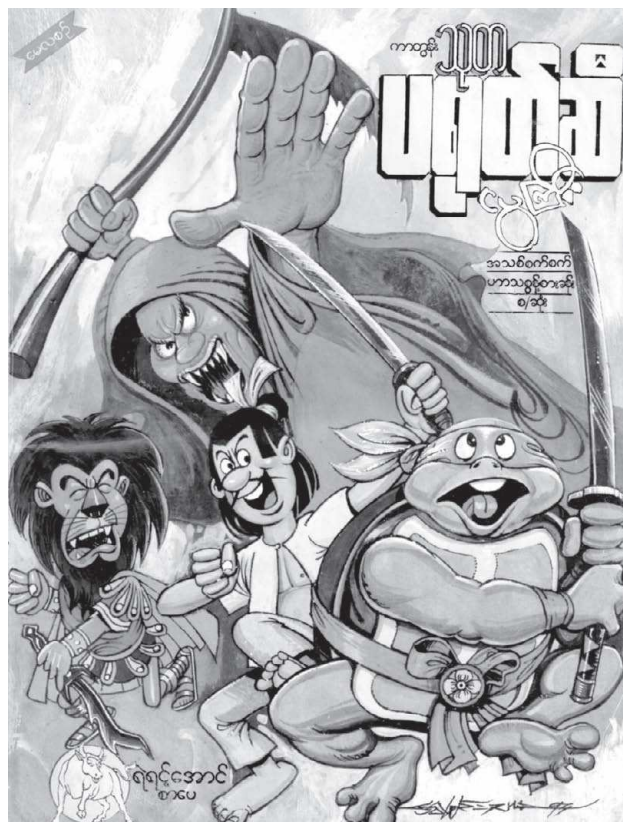


**FIG. 9.5.** A Thu Ta comic book of early 1990s. Comic books were printed on extremely coarse newsprint; covers were newsprint-type cardboard with a slick, full-color overlay page. Courtesy of Thu Ta.

Ngwe Kyi, Chit Shwe, and Thu Ta exemplify the multiple talents and multitasking abilities required of successful cartoonists in Burma. Ngwe Kyi (1993) has been versatile, shining in the areas of caricature, editorial cartoons, and traditional storytelling illustration; he published two cartoon/comics monthlies simultaneously, *Picture World Monthly Cartoon* and *Shasha Papa*. Chit Shwe (1993) said that he had drawn strips and other cartoons for newspapers and magazines since 1963, and dabbled in the genres of "humor, love, and politics, everything"; while Thu Ta (1993), known mainly for newspaper cartoons, also produced a monthly comic book, based on his character Payote Swe. He completed every part of the sixty-four page book without help. A throwback to an even earlier time (1958, when he began his career), Shwe Min Thar (1993) had been involved in caricature, cover design, humorous novels, painting, newspaper cartoons, and magazine strips, the latter of which he later issued as a book, *Cartoon Diary*.



FIG. 9.6. The government-published weekly cartoon magazine *Shwe Thway*. July 31, 1993.

Although for the most part these pioneers did not see many differences between the 1960s and early 1990s in terms of the cartooning profession, there were some who did. Maung Maung (1993) thought that cartoons were more popular in the 1990s, to the extent that comics vendors rented comics to people to bide time while lined up in queues waiting to see movies. Khin Shwe (1993) and Chit Shwe (1993) agreed that there was broader readership in the early 1990s than in the 1960s, but sales were lower in the 1990s because of the high prices of comic books.

Other publications that appeared during these first two decades of the postindependence period were the weekly cartoon magazine *Shwe Thway* (Bonny son), published by the government in a four-color process from 1969 to the present day, and *Teza Illustrated Monthly*, published by the Information Ministry. In 2005, *Shwe Thway* reported a circulation of sixty thousand.

In Myo Thant's (2005) categorization scheme, Burma's second distinct period of cartooning was the 1970s to the mid-1980s, a period when the newspaper industry declined, sending cartoonists scampering for jobs



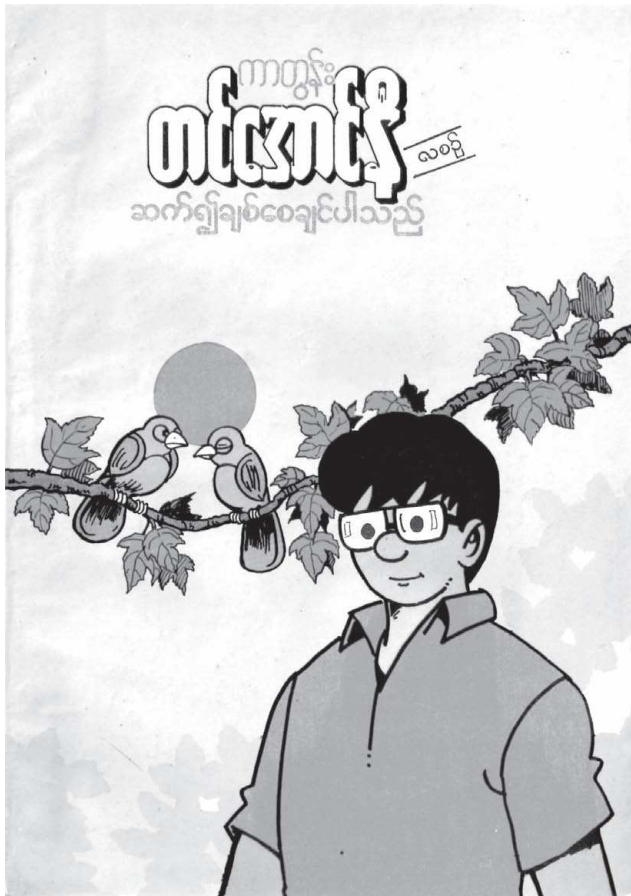


FIG. 9.7. A Tin Aung Ni comic book in digest size. Early 1990s. Courtesy of Tin Aung Ni.

in the magazine and growing book publishing sectors. More comic books appeared, in the process cultivating the “audience’s taste for more publications of this nature” (Myo Thant 2005). About 1970, comic books expanded their audiences, appealing not just to children but also to teenagers with love/romance, adventure, and mystery titles.

New comic artists who became popular beginning in the 1970s were Win Maung, with *Mi, Maw, May, Ma* (Four girls); Than Htun, with *Maung Ti Htwin* (Mr. Inventor); Tin Aung Ni; and Maung Maung Aung. Than Htun (1993), who called his Mr. Inventor a “different” type of character (a scientist), said that because he had read science articles, he decided to create his own character by “adopting others.” Tin Aung Ni’s blockbuster comic book was the monthly *Ko Pyar Leung* (Mischievous one), which, by 1993, had spawned five movie scripts and earned him royalties when he sold the book to another publisher. Marked by an abundance of black

background, *Ko Pyar Leung* was popular with children and adults alike (Tin Aung Ni 1993). Maung Maung Aung, who began cartooning in 1970, created one of Burma’s very rare female cartoon characters, a young lass named Meechit, a word with the double meaning of “matchbox” and “dear daughter.” The humorous strip, published in *Mahaythee* magazine, tried to “convey messages through this mischievous girl” (Maung Maung Aung 1993).

The twenty years from the mid-1980s to roughly 2005 that constitute the third stage of Myanmar cartoons/comics in Myo Thant’s scheme saw stagnation mixed with growth, as production costs mounted, sales dipped, comics rental shops flourished, government control loosened for a short time, and professionalization increased. Old-timers Chit Shwe and Khin Shwe, in separate interviews, reported that comics readership mushroomed, with 85 percent of the population enjoying them, while circulation dwindled. Khin Shwe (1993) said that circulation fell four- to fivefold from its peak, claiming that “a comic of two thousand [printed copies] now [which was normal in 1993] used to have eight to ten thousand.” This was attributable, according to Shwe Min Thar (1993), to a monstrous increase in cost per copy, from one kyat in the late 1970s to forty kyats (officially US\$6.66 at the conversion rate at that time) in 1993. As a result, the majority of comics readers got their books from Yangon’s more than one thousand rental shops, where they could rent a comic for one kyat per day. Although sales were low, the average readership of a single copy of a Myanmar comic book was thirty to forty people.

The slackened book trade meant that success for cartoonists had come at the price of long hours and hard work. All Myanmar cartoonists were, and continue to be, freelancers, finding work in the government dailies and magazines and also finding outlets in privately printed and self-published comics. In 1993, general-interest magazines normally carried eight to ten pages of cartoons and illustrations. Many cartoonists could not (and still cannot) sustain themselves on cartooning alone; for example, in 1993, one cartoonist piloted



a riverboat as his primary work, while others toiled as artists and designers. Cartoonists talked about free-lancing for ten to fifteen periodicals on a regular basis during this third stage; for example, U Wunna drew for fifteen newspapers and magazines as well as doing all the stories and drawings for the quarterly *Thamain Paw Thut* comic book (1993).

The 8888 Revolution (August 8, 1988) temporarily gave cartoonists a reprieve from oppressive military rule. As Lintner (1991, 32) wrote: “At the height of the pro-democracy uprising . . . , Rangoon alone had almost 40 independent newspapers and magazines, full of biting satire.” Additionally, the newly established Artists and Cartoonists Union of Burma printed cartoons in its periodical *Ahyoung Thit* (New color) that strongly attacked the government. Some *Ahyoung Thit* cartoons satirizing Ne Win’s dying Burma Socialist Programme Party were copied as posters and displayed on so-called democracy walls.

The short period of freedom ended with the bloody coup of September 1988, after which all periodicals (except for a few printed by the government) were shut down, legislation and penalties were tightened, and many who had participated in the democracy campaign were arrested or forced into exile. Among those arrested was writer and part-time cartoonist Maung Thawka, sentenced to life imprisonment; he died after two years of mistreatment while in jail (Lintner 1991, 32). Three cartoonists—Ko Ko Maung, Win Tun (Mr. Burma), and Harn Lay—went into exile in Thailand, where they continued their attacks on the Myanmar regime. While still in Myanmar, Ko Ko Maung, who had drawn historical comics about Burmese kings, was banned from drawing for two years beginning in 1980 because he had created comics based on the last days of the Konbaung Dynasty. The drawings depicted corruption and nepotism in the royal court, which government authorities in the 1980s correctly analyzed were meant as a parallel to the present-day situation. Win Tun contributed regularly to fifteen different Myanmar magazines before he left the country. Although critical, his comic strips done in exile were “softer, with



FIG. 9.8. A page from a Maung Maung comic book of 1993. Courtesy of Maung Maung.

more emphasis on the funnier side of developments in Burma” (Lintner 1991; see also Smith 1992, 10). Today, cartoons taking on the Myanmar government regularly appear in the *Irrawaddy*, published in Thailand (see Brooten 2014). Harn Lay has been the *Irrawaddy*’s cartoonist since 2003.

Cartoons carried in the only legal post-1988 newspaper, the *Working People’s Daily* (*Lok-tha Pyei-thu Nei-zin*), were propagandistic drivel supporting the regime and attacking its critics.<sup>5</sup> Yet, even in this tightly controlled environment, there was indirect criticism. For example, in the October 4, 1990, *Working People’s Daily*, a cartoon showed foreign critics screaming at a steadfast soldier who had “Defecto Government” emblazoned on his chest. The issue was scrapped when the authorities recognized the “mistake,” and the next day, the same cartoon appeared with the words changed to “De Facto Government” (Lintner 1991, 33; see also Lintner 1990, 22).



**FIG. 9.9.** The author meeting with stalwarts of Myanmar comics and cartoons, Thamada Hotel, Yangon, 1993. U Ngwe Kyi to the left of the author; Maung Maung Aung, second from the right.

During interviews in 1993, Myanmar cartoonists pointed to constraints such as limited newspaper and magazine outlets, all in government hands; close scrutiny of their work by the Home Affairs Ministry; censorship; and taboo subjects, including caricatures of political leaders and themes of politics, sex, and violence. Most of the cartoonists expressed a belief that the situation had improved. “We’re free to draw whatever we like except political satire,” Maung Maung (1993) said. (For more specific information on government policies concerning censorship in the early 1990s, see Allott 1994, 87–105.)

Despite the draconian laws and extralegal harassment, cartoonists continued to seek out an audience for their critical works throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. They joined writers and other artists who sipped tea at outdoor teashops, discussed politics and other topics in hushed tones, and created and shared their works. One cartoonist, Maung Sun Than, who used the teashops as a conduit for his forbidden work, sold his cartoons, loaded with metaphors, symbolism, hints, and innuendo, for two dollars each. Maung Sun Than compared his work as a political cartoonist to a soccer match, as reported by Brian Mockenhaupt (2001, 73): “He can only loft the ball in front of the goal; he must rely on the reader to head it in. ‘I always estimate the

condition of the goalkeeper and the referee,’ he says. ‘The readers must jump very high.’ If the message is too obvious, it will be censored; too obtuse and the reader won’t understand.”

Among the most successful comic books during this third stage were the abovementioned *Ko Pyar Leung* and *Maung Ti Htwi* as well as Maung Wunna’s *Dominating the Scene*, Mye Zar’s animal character book *Sein Myauk Myauk*, and Ngwe Kyi’s comics based on humorous Burmese folklore. Among newcomers to the profession were Soe Thaw Tar (1993), with his magazine character Hman Kyaung, whom he described as a “foolish person with spectacles”; and Maung Shwe Win, who drew news cartoons.<sup>6</sup>

Issues long associated with cartoons and comics have spilled into contemporary times, the fourth stage of Myo Thant’s categorization scheme. Cartoonists still must labor under the watchful eyes of government authorities, although regulations were significantly relaxed in 2011 and 2012, when government censorship was effectively replaced by self-censorship. However, more recently, the state instituted a policy that publications must be submitted to a government agency for postpublication scrutiny. Private ownership of daily newspapers still is not possible. Prior to the 2011 and 2012 partial easing of restrictions, some cartoons, particularly those

by Awpikye, were banned. In 2007, Awpikye had been declared persona non grata by the military government, after which all periodicals rejected his work.

The cost of comic books remains prohibitively expensive for most Burmese. Although there are about thirty weekly and monthly publications aimed at children, they are beyond the means of most families. Some comic books cost thirty-five hundred kyats (about US\$3.50), equivalent to half a family's daily budget. Readers either rent comics or purchase them from street vendors for about five hundred kyats. Myanmar comic books must also contend with competition from new media and comics from abroad, as well as a lack of support from teachers and parents (Nyein Ei Ei Htwe 2012). The most popular titles of recent years include *Myaine-yar-zar Tut Pi* by Sway Min Dhanubyu, *Htway Mon Lay Mon* by Poe Zar, and *In My Neighborhood* by Ko Shwe Htoo-Pyay.

The publication of cartoons and comic strips has not kept pace with the increase in the number of periodicals in Myanmar. According to cartoonist Mye Zar, this is because some magazine editors are reluctant to print comics for fear of government censure (quoted in Zon Pann Pwint 2011). Cartoonist Ngwe Kyi gave another reason for the depletion of local newspaper and magazine cartoons:

As time has passed, readers have seen fewer and fewer cartoons and comic strips in newspapers and magazines. The process of printing cartoons has faded out but on the other hand artists' creations and their sense of humour in satirical drawing has improved. We have found that some artists have imitated the style of foreign cartoon characters, so the Myanmar traditional style is disappearing. It is important to maintain the traditional style so that the world can see that our style is different from others. (quoted in Zon Pann Pwint 2009)

Perhaps the recent availability of the Internet in Myanmar has affected the distribution of printed cartoons, as a few cartoonists now have their own websites. An online cartoon journal was launched in 2009, where

cartoonists and other enthusiasts can learn about Myanmar's rich comic art tradition, swap ideas and learn from one another, and preserve older cartoons, bringing them back into focus. The website, created by 969 Graphic and Animation Studio, was presented in both Burmese and English.

The Internet could be the salvation of Myanmar comics and cartoons, except for two significant limitations: the Internet is controlled by the government, and most people in Myanmar cannot afford computers. In the meantime, cartoonists will do what they have been doing for decades—living by their wits.

## Notes

1. A typed handout given to this author by Burmese cartoonists in 1993 lists the date as 1914, the Christmas special issue of the *Rangoon Times*. Aung Zaw's 1912 date is used here because he seems to have completed additional research during the intervening decade.

2. The British organizers were assisted by Commissioner Hla Aung, his wife Mya May, and some young Burmese artists.

3. As with other periods in the history of Myanmar's comic art, there is confusion and vague referencing by writers on comic art. Ngwe Kyi (1996, 29) said that earlier, in 1947, the magazine *Shumawa* used a one-panel and a two-panel gag cartoon. He credited *Shumawa* with making gag cartoons an "indispensable" feature of magazines ever since. Aung Shein's *Popular* magazine apparently was solely made up of cartoons and comics.

4. In this author's interview with Thaw Ka (1993), he spelled the title as *Ah Yang* (Wild one), but others have called it *Ayine* (Wild boy) (Hpyo Wai Tha 2012) and *Ah Yaing* (Myo Thant 2005).

5. Described as "crude and deeply unfunny," cartoons in the *Working People's Daily* often were racially oriented, attacking "impure" marriages with Myanmar's Indian and Chinese minorities, the influence of foreigners, and the British Broadcasting Corporation (Smith 1992, 9).

6. Ngwe Kyi (1996, 28) named the top ten comic book artists and their characters in 1996 as: Aung Shein (U Shan Sar and U Dein Daung), Myint Thein (San Shwe Myint), Win Maung (Mi Maw May Ma), Maung Lwin (Nga Htet Phya), Thaw Ka (Ah Yang), Aung Aung (Shwe Gaung Byaung), Tin Aung Ni (Ko Pyar Leung), U Wunna (Thamain Paw Thut), Poe Zar (Htwe Mon, Lay Mon), and Swe Myint/Danupyu (Myaing Yar Zar Tut Pi). He reiterated what others said: that the circulation of comic books averaged about three thousand copies, people usually rented comic books, and readership was high. He said that comic book artists usually were paid double that of magazine cartoonists and that most cartoonists work in various aspects of the profession.



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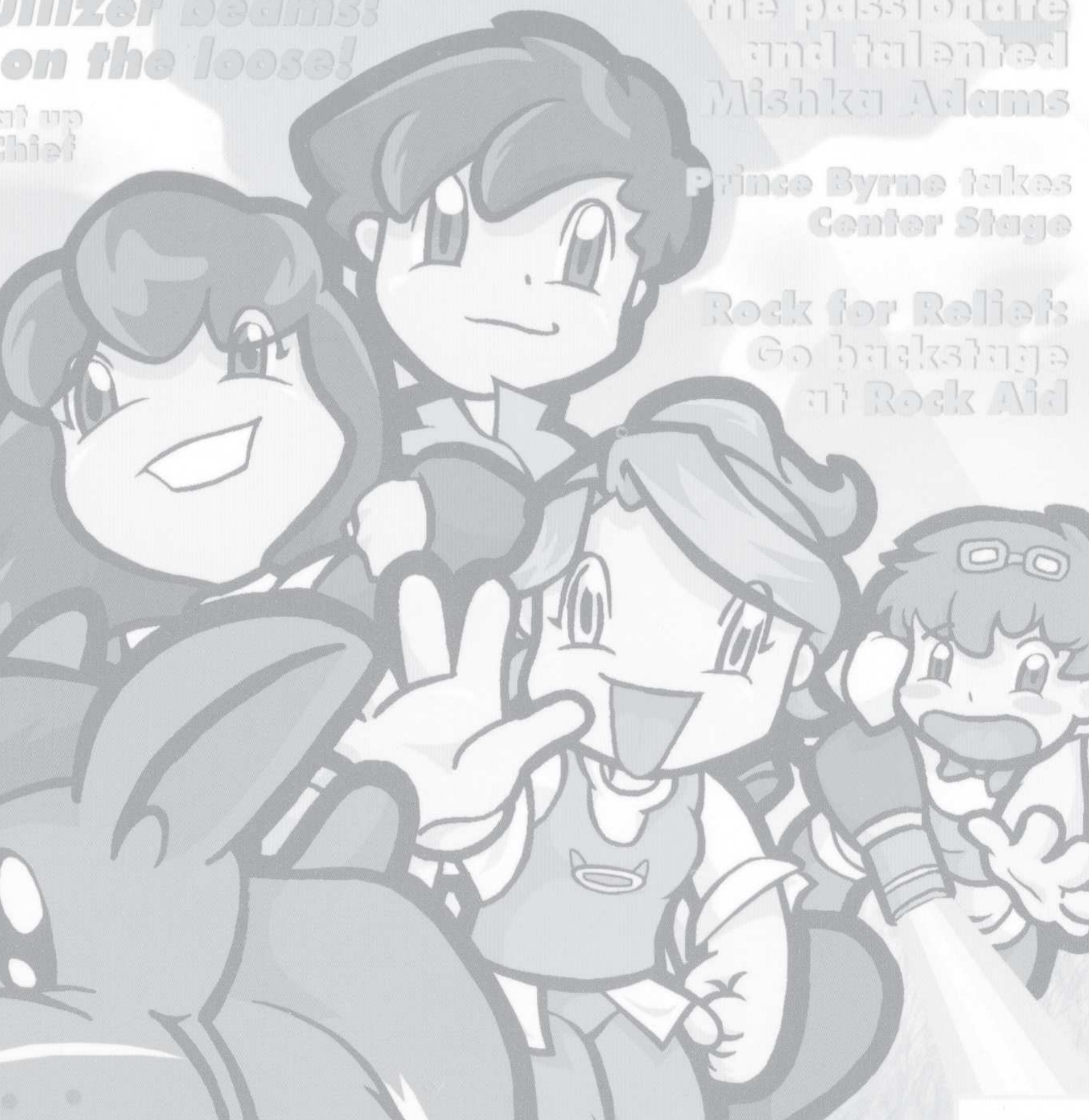
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**and talented**  
**Mishka Adams**

**Prince Byrne takes**  
**Center Stage**

**Rock for Relief:**  
**Go backstage**  
**at Rock Aid**



Philippine cartoons, comic strips, and *komiks* have exhibited a few uncommon traits and personalities during their century and a quarter of existence. Few countries can boast that their first cartoon was created by the principal national hero; the Philippines can, with the story of *The Monkey and the Tortoise*, drawn by the nationalist Dr. José Rizal in 1885 (D. Redondo 1979). How often has a country's movie industry been as dependent upon comic books for stories as the Philippines during its film and komiks heyday? For years, about two-fifths of the Philippines' domestic production of movies could be traced back to comics characters or themes. Also, it would be a challenge to match Philippine komiks writers and artists in productivity and quality of workmanship; some have written or drawn more than a dozen serialized stories weekly, while others have attained international acclaim for their artistry. And seldom has it happened that a country whose first generations of cartoonists lived under the yoke of a colonial mentality reverses the situation and produces comic artists who themselves actively participate in comics creation in the former colonizing nation. Such was the case in the Philippines, where cartoonists who created the first comic strips and komiks imitated those of the United States in plot, character type, and artistic style, but later their successors found their own way, producing interesting stories and exquisite artwork that became very popular in the United States.

In other ways, Philippine comic art developed much the same as elsewhere, appearing first in general-interest and humor magazines. Satirical periodicals such as *Te Con Leche*, *El Tío Verdades*, *Biro-Biro*, and *Miau* lampooned the Spaniards and Americans alike between 1898 and 1901 (Lent 2004, 74; also McCoy and Roces 1985, 7–18), and, during the early U.S. occupation, four dominant magazines (*Lipang Kalabaw*, *Philippine Free Press*, *Telembang*, and the *Independent*) used strong political cartoons aimed at the transgressions of the U.S. and Philippine authorities.

In the early 1920s, when the publisher Ramon Roces came onto the scene first with *Liwayway* in 1923 and then with *Graphic* four years later, comics were in for

## Chapter 10

# The Philippines



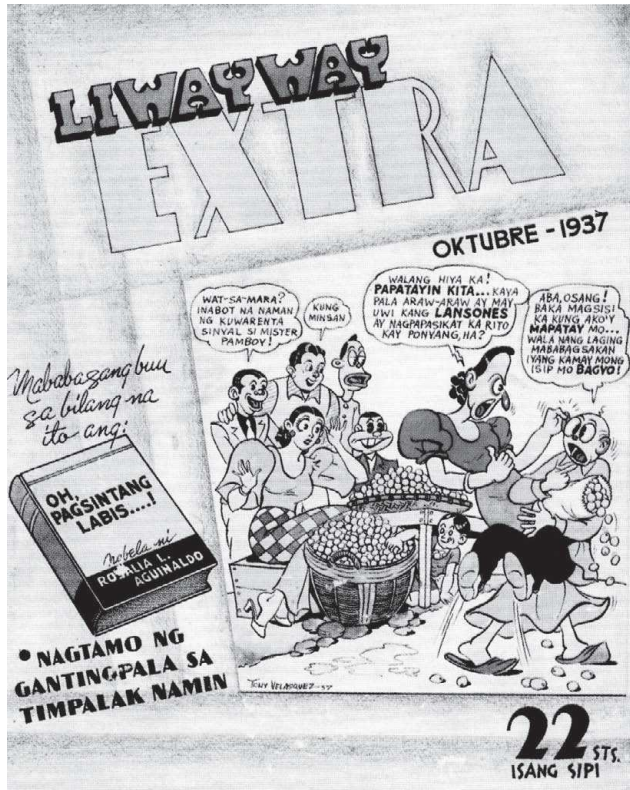


FIG. 10.1. A comic strip featured on the cover of the literary magazine *Liwayway*. October 1937.

a boost. Roces's periodicals used cartoons and, beginning in early 1929, comic strips; after World War II, he played the leading role in establishing a komiks industry in the Philippines. In a number of these ventures, Roces worked closely with cartoonist Tony Velasquez.

The creation of the first Philippine comic strip, Velasquez's *Kenkoy*, in December 1928 had much support from Roces. Once envisioned, the artwork for the strip was assigned to a *Liwayway* senior artist, but, according to Velasquez (1988; see also Lent 1993), when the artist "for so many weeks, was not able to do it, Don Ramon told me, "Tony, can you do it?" I told him I'd try." *Mga Kabalbalan ni Kenkoy*, as the Tagalog-language strip was called, debuted as four panels in the January 11, 1929, issue of *Liwayway*. Within a year, the strip expanded to a full page in color. Enthusiastically received, *Kenkoy* eventually was translated into four other vernacular languages for use in Roces's magazines *Bannawag*, *Bisaya*, *Hiligaynon*, and *Bikolnon*, and made into a song, a poem, movies, and komiks.

Generally regarded as an Americanized character, *Kenkoy*, according to noted komiks creator Nonoy



FIG. 10.2. Tony Velasquez (right), the father of Philippine komiks, with cartoonist Norman Isaac. Manila, September 1988. Photo by John A. Lent.

Marcelo (1980), was "a ludicrous portrait of the Filipino . . . pathetically trying but barely succeeding in keeping up with his American mentors." Velasquez disagreed, claiming that his character was Filipino, conceived in the Philippines without outside influences (see Lent 1993). In the 1930s, Velasquez conceived another strip, *Ponyang Halobaybay*, and introduced new characters to *Kenkoy*, some of which evolved into separate titles.

The 1930s saw numerous other magazine strips come onto the scene, some imitating prominent American funnies, examples being Francisco Reyes's *Kulafu* (*Tarzan*) and Procopio Borromeo's *Goyo at Kikay* (*Bringing Up Father*). Among other popular 1930s strips were José Zabala-Santos's *Titina*, the *Popeye*-like *Lukas Malakas*, *Sianong Sano*, and *Popoy*, all in *Sampaguita* magazine; fifteen-year-old Francisco V. Coching's *Bing Bigotilyo* in *Silahis* magazine; and J. M. Perez's *Abilitat sa Akong* and *Si Pamboy at si Osang*, both in *Liwayway*.

Only *Kenkoy* continued to appear throughout the Japanese occupation, published by the Japan Information Bureau in *Liwayway*. Perhaps for fear of being labeled a collaborator, Velasquez (1988) explained that the Japanese used the character in their health campaign and that "*Kenkoy* did not get involved in politics or war, just sanitation." Velasquez was conscripted by the Japanese to also do a daily strip for Manila's *Daily Tribune* called *Kalibapi Family*, depicting the life of Filipinos under the new Japanese social order. When the war ended, some of the old strips resumed in general-interest magazines or in the newly born komiks. Prewar cartoonists, along with a host of newcomers, helped give rise to komiks.





FIG. 10.3. *Album ng Kabalbalan ni Kenko* by Tony Velasquez. November 14, 1941. Courtesy of Tony Velasquez.

The first komiks took their cue from comic books brought in by American soldiers during World War II, imitating the American prototypes in size, format, and paper quality. The first was *Halakhak* (a mimetic word for laughter),<sup>1</sup> started by Universal Bookstore owner Jaime Lucas (who was also a practicing attorney) at the urging of former editorial cartoonist and wartime anti-Japanese guerrilla propagandist Isaac Tolentino, who became the komik's editor (S. P. Redondo 1979). The forty-two page *Halakhak*, which featured love, humor,

mystery, and adventure stories, closed after ten issues. Velasquez (1988) attributed the closure to a lack of facilities: "no press, only a bookstore owner and publisher and no finances."

In 1947, Roces and Velasquez teamed up again in the cause of komiks, establishing Ace Publications, whose sole purpose was to publish comic books. Velasquez edited Ace's first magazine, *Pilipino Komiks*, a fortnightly with an initial print run of ten thousand and a low operating budget (see Villegas





FIG. 10.4. The inaugural issue of the Philippines' first comic book, *Halakhak*. November 15, 1946.

2007). Velasquez said that he was asked by Roces to collaborate with him in the new business of komiks. "I was flattered," Velasquez (1988) said, elaborating: "Don Ramon said he'd give me a month to do it. Then, artists were not very busy so I could meet his deadline. Don Ramon told me, 'I don't think this [komik] will last; just do what you can about it.' I kept insisting, 'This will last, Don Ramon.' I had already a plan to do my own comics magazine when Don Ramon called." Velasquez handled *Pilipino Komiks* on his own for two years. The komik's popularity soon prompted Ace to start *Tagalog Klasiks* (1949), mostly Tagalog reprints of American comics; *Hiwaga Komiks* (1950), containing mystery, fantasy, and horror stories; *Espesyal Komiks* (1952), mainly action and detective content; and the pocket-size *Kenkoy Komiks* (1952). All appeared twice monthly (later, comic books tended to appear weekly and even twice weekly) and sold about a hundred thousand copies per issue.

From 1950 to 1953, other titles by other teams were published, including, in order of appearance, *Silangan Komiks* (March 15, 1950), edited by Ben Cabailo Jr., the first non-Roces komik; *Aksiyon Komiks* (1950), published by Arcade Publications; *Bituin Komiks* (April 1950), by Felix J. Quiogue Publications; *Bulaklak Komix* (August 1950), by Social and Commercial Press (later Bulaklak Publications); *Pantastik Komix* (October 1950), by All Star Publications and also edited by Ben Cabailo Jr.; and two others published by Social and Commercial Press: *Manila Klasiks* (1952) and *Extra Komiks* (1953) (Villegas 2007, 8–9). Twenty different titles had flooded the market by 1954, although some died by decade's end. Additionally, by 1950, the vernacular magazines *Liwayway*, *Bulaklak*, *Ilang-ilang*, *Tiktik*, and *Sinagtala* had issued comics supplements. Some publishers also reprinted U.S. comic books, as verified by Chronicle Publishing Company publisher Oscar Lopez (1964), who said that his company quit publishing American comics in the 1960s as Tagalog-language komiks proliferated.

In komiks' golden era (the 1950s), a large number of works in various genres<sup>2</sup> appeared, brought out by the great names of Philippine cartooning, one of whom was Larry Alcala, who started his career in 1946. What distinguished the profession in the 1950s, according to Alcala (1988), was that "[c]artoonists had love for their work. It was not as commercialized then as now." He said that the good times faded when a 1963 strike in the printing industry closed Ace: "When that happened, a lot of contributors [to Ace komiks] put up their own books. With the proliferation of books, quality went down."

Nevertheless, as in the United States, comic books were rejuvenated in the 1960s when new types and genres appeared. The medium, mainly published in Tagalog, became a prime vehicle to promote the national language (officially called Filipino); the careers of some of the Philippines' most famous cartoonists took off; and the industry reorganized with newly established companies and titles that survived for many years.

The 1960s also yielded the *bomba* genre and developmental komiks, both unique in Asia. The pornographic



bomba komiks were published by fly-by-night operators and thrived from 1967 until martial law was declared in 1972. The most successful of the first batch of bomba publishers was Cil Evangelista, a movie talent manager who included in his komiks nude photos of Philippine movie stars. Reincarnated when martial law was lifted in 1981, the genre was dominated by Sagalongos Publications (*Playmate*, *Sakdal Sexy*, *Sakdal Bold*, *Sakdal Erotik*, *Macho*, and *Tiktik*) and R. G. Publication (*For Gents Only*). Because many titles did not contain publication information, the courts ruled in 1985 that more established outfits had a right to publish bomba as long as they used staff boxes (mastheads). Sagalongos and other bomba publishers printed the text of the 1985 court ruling along with political messages in their magazines, as well as the controversial photos and drawings, some of the latter showing sexual penetration (see David 1990, 156).

It is not entirely clear how bomba flourished alongside the politically powerful and censorious Roman Catholic Church and within the bounds of the komiks industry's strict, self-imposed code, drawn up in January 1955 by Ace Publications and quickly accepted across the industry. With other publishers' approval, the Association of Publishers and Editors of Philippine Comics-Magazines (APEPCOM) was created to oversee the self-censorship process, with Tony Velasquez presiding (Lent 1999, 180–90; Roxas and Arevalo 1985, 58). APEPCOM merged with the Catholic Laymen's Committee for Decency to "strip comics of lavish sex, horror, gangsterism and other filth harmful to morals." Upon the advent of martial law in 1972, APEPCOM was revived as Kapisanan ng mga Publisista at mga Patnugot ng mga Komiks-magasin sa Pilipino (KPPKP), broadening the association's code to closely align the komiks industry with the government's national development goals. Later, the publisher Graphic Arts Services Incorporated (GASI) instituted its own code.

The other new komiks genre of the 1960s was "developmental komiks," used in social change campaigns (see Jones 1987, 1, 8). That the Philippines innovated developmental komiks is not surprising, since the

concepts "development journalism" and "development communication" were coined and framed there as well. While the Population Center, a private organization, and the government National Media Production Center published developmental komiks, focused mainly on family planning themes, researchers at the University of the Philippines Institute of Mass Communications (and, to a lesser extent, the University of the Philippines at Los Baños Department of Development Communication) tested ways to use such comics and ascertain their effectiveness (*Asian Mass Communication Bulletin* 1978, 12–13). The studies usually showed that developmental komiks did have an impact.<sup>3</sup> (For more on developmental komiks, see Maglalang 1976; Chen 1989; and Bundoc-Ocampo 1983.)

In the 1950s and 1960s, cartoonists and writers who were to have an important impact on Philippine (and, in some cases, American) comics came onto the scene in full force, among them Alfredo Alcala, Larry Alcala (see Matawaran 1987; Paulino 1995, 1998), Clodualdo del Mundo, Nestor Redondo, Mars Ravelo (see Matienzo 1979), Francisco Coching, Fred Carrillo, Alex Niño, Pablo S. Gomez, Federico C. Javinal, Jesse F. Santos, Menny Martin, and Tenny Henson.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, many new komiks publishers came into existence, sparking the president of the Philippine Society of Illustrators and Cartoonists to write in 1963: "To get started in the komiks business all one needs is to gather a group of artists and then look for a printer" (Patanne 1963, 4). Among the new companies were G. Miranda and Sons/Mapalad, which together issued *Lagim Komiks* (later *L'Amour Komiks*), *Diamante Komiks*, *Sweethearts Komiks*, *Short Stories Komiks*, *Wakasan Komiks*, *Heart-Throbs Komiks*, *Sam-paguita Komiks*, and others; Bulaklak Publications, with *Manila Klasiks* and *Bulaklak Express*; Soller Press, with *Wow Komiks*, *Romantic Klasiks*, and others; and Gold Star Publishing House. Five years after Ace folded in 1963, Ramon R. Marcelino organized a new Ace Publications as a sister of GASI, issuing *Bondying Komeex* followed by *Kiss Komeex*, *Pogi Magasin*, and *Hapi-Hapi Komeex* (later *Happy Komiks*).



FIG. 10.5. *Ang Kampanerang Kuba* by Pablo S. Gomez, not only a very famous *komiks* novelist but also a unionist and owner/publisher of PSG Publishing House. Courtesy of Pablo S. Gomez.

PSG Publishing House and its magazine *United Komiks* appeared in 1963<sup>4</sup> when *komiks* novelist Pablo S. Gomez (head of the *komiks* union at the time) sought to relieve the pain of the devastating 1963 strike. He explained: "I had to think of how to help people who lost their jobs" (Gomez 2008). Gomez added four more titles (*Planet Komiks*, *Universal Komiks*, *Continental Komiks*, and *Kidlat Komiks*), but, because of a subsequent national economic downturn, he sold the rights to *United Komiks* and *Universal Komiks* to Affiliated Publications in 1973. Affiliated's *komiks* appealed to movie fans; its initial publications, *Nora Aunor Entertainment*

*Magazine* and *Pip Entertainment Magazine* (both 1970), were named after popular film stars.

Other new *komiks* publishers were Mars Ravelo's RAR Publishing House (1970–1983), whose first four titles were slightly larger in format than other *komiks* and featured many of Ravelo's own stories; Damian Velasquez's (Tony's brother) *Adventures Illustrated Magazines*, publishers of the short-lived *Adventure Komiks* and *Voodoo Komiks* as well as the top-selling *Love Story Illustrated Magazine*; and textbook publisher Rex Printing, which moved into *komiks* in 1978, first with *Rex Komiks* and *Astro Komiks* and then with eight



FIG. 10.6. Nonoy Marcelo working at the *Manila Chronicle*. Manila, July 17, 1993. Photo by John A. Lent.

other titles, seven of which (excepting *Tapusan*) featured serialized novels.

Islas Filipinas Publishing Company innovated in local children's komiks when, in 1978, it issued *Pilipino Funny Komiks for Children*. *Funny Komiks* also featured nonillustrated, morally and scholastically oriented materials, published drawings and photographs submitted by child readers, and used short, humorous anecdotes about children submitted by parents. To appeal to parent readers, *Funny Komiks* added strips such as Roni Santiago's *Mr. & Mrs.*

By the 1970s, the komiks industry needed to be restabilized, as publishing firms were closing because of economic problems; key creators left to work for DC, Marvel, and other U.S. comics publishers; and the authoritarian Ferdinand Marcos government as well as the Roman Catholic Church complained about the allegedly detrimental effects of komiks. As before, Ramon Roces<sup>5</sup> came to the rescue, establishing GASI and Atlas Publishing to recapture this lucrative business from the small competitors that were too financially strapped to publish quality komiks.

With the Velasquez brothers and Ramon Marcelino in charge, GASI in 1962–1963 issued *Kislap Komiks*, *Pioneer Komiks*, *Aliwan Komiks*, *Pinoy Komiks*, *Pinoy Klasiks*, and *Holiday Komiks*. In the 1970s, GASI added more titles, and between 1975 and 1978 saw a fourfold increase in total circulation and profits. In February 1978, the company merged with Affiliated Publications and added another five komiks titles.

The history of Atlas goes back to 1964 when Roces, with help from Tony Velasquez, revived several old titles under the company Pilipino Komiks Incorporated (PKI), including *Pilipino Komiks*, *Espesyal Komiks*, *Hiwaga Komiks*, and *Tagalog Komiks*; *TSS (Teenagers' Songs and Shows)*, *Darna Komiks*, *King Komiks*, *Love-Drama Komiks*, *B'wisheart Komiks*, and *Kasaysayan Komiks* were started later. Roces and other PKI principals established Circulation Service to manage marketing and distribution, and eventually they renamed PKI the Atlas Publishing Company. Atlas's success was attributed to its popular love-drama-action novels, movie gossip columns, and large number of komiks *nobelas* (novels) adapted to movie box office hits.

The imposition of martial law in September 1972 closed down almost all media in the Philippines; those few media outlets that were permitted to continue operating usually did so under new names and ownership, and under conditions that favored the authorities. Although most komiks retained their original names and publishers, the publishing environment was entirely changed, largely because of a stricter comics code. Whereas the 1950s code emphasized a need to play down crime, the revised code of November 1972 set forth five guidelines protecting the government and the president from negative portrayals and requiring comics writers to present an entirely positive view of the Philippines. As a result, stories dealing with poverty and social unrest disappeared. Furthermore, the Marcos regime created its own komiks, which bolstered Marcos's image and supported his favorite projects.





FIG. 10.7. *Wakasan Komiks Magasin*, October 15, 1988.

Some cartoonists were blacklisted by the regime, notably Nonoy Marcelo, known since 1963 for his comic strip *Tisoy* in the *Manila Times*. Marcelo in fact played both sides, editing the government's antilittering komik *Superaide* and working for the administration's National Media Production Center, at the same time drawing the mouse character *Ikabod* to act as a "balance to the big fat cats" and "to counter the opposition" (Marcelo 1988, 1992). As Rafael (1995) explained: "Marcelo's use of Taglish [a mixture of Tagalog and English] permitted him to double-code the dialogue of the characters in ways that deflected even as it acknowledged the regime's power to regulate discourse."

Marcelo related how his duplicitous role came about. In the early Marcos years, he lived first in Hong Kong, and then in New York City from 1970 to 1977. While in

the United States, he worked in publishing, simultaneously contributing political and other cartoons to an overseas Philippine periodical as well as to magazines in Manila. Because of the political cartoons, he was placed on the Marcos blacklist, where he remained until told it was safe to return to Manila, under the stipulation that he work at the National Media Production Center and not commit any punishable offenses. His two years at the NMPC allowed him to do pioneering work in animation, and at the same time to resume drawing satirical cartoons surreptitiously. He explained: "The security blanket that NMPC promised me was saving my strips from being censored or abolished. No matter what I put in my cartoons, they did not censor. I put in a lot of political. The authorities did not hit me, because they thought it was coming from NMPC" (Marcelo 1992). After Marcos was ousted in February 1986, Marcelo continued drawing *Ikabod* in various forms—news-paper strips, komiks, pocket komiks, and jumbo book compilations.

Another trend in the early 1970s was Philippine cartoonists working for American comics publishers; some moved to the United States while others remained in the Philippines but contributed their work directly or through brokers to American publishers. One of the first Filipino immigrant cartoonists, Tony De Zuniga, called DC Comics' attention to the pool of Philippine talent, after which DC editors and officials traveled to Manila to convince Nestor Redondo and some of his CRAF artists and writers to work for them under a broker system. Marcelo (1988) said that the brokers were Filipinos already living in the United States, who skimmed off for themselves much of the payments to the artists. Although the Philippine "invasion" brought international attention to some Filipino cartoonists and raised the bar of American comics, it also depleted the talent pool for komiks production in the Philippines itself.<sup>6</sup>

The characteristic komiks genre of the 1970s was the supernovel, a long-running serial story. Nobela and *wakasan* (short story) komiks filled a void after virtually all Philippine periodicals stopped publishing serious literature. Commencing in 1975, komiks editorial houses

ensured that each of their titles included at least one established or potential supernovel as its hallmark (Bejo 1986, 161). A typical komik contained three segments of nobelas and four or five *wakasan* stories, while some books were devoted exclusively to either of these types, for example *Wakasan Komiks*, *Tapusan Komiks*, and *Lovelife Komiks* for *wakasan* and *Nobela* strictly for novels.

The weekly nobela *Anak ni Zuma*, written by Jim Fernandez in *Aliwan*, was the top-seller among nobelas and lasted for at least a decade. Other long-running komiks nobelas were Hal Santiago's *The Hands in Pioneer Komiks*, adapted from Egyptian mythology and narrating the story of a pair of chopped-off, one-eyed, living hands with super strength and telekinetic powers, and Elena Patron's *Sleeping Beauty*, about a sick woman who sleeps for eighteen years, watched over by a young doctor who falls in love with her and continues to love her when she wakes up even though she acts like a child (see Reyes 1980). Through works like these, writers such as Fernandez, Patron, Gomez, and Carlo J. Caparas turned the last part of the 1970s into a golden era of fantasy stories.

Soledad Reyes wrote that fantasy titles, which made up about 70 percent of all komiks in 1980 (S. Reyes 1985, 51), tried to "rectify nature's neglect and contemporary society's lack of concern by endowing the crippled, the ugly, the sickly, and the poverty-stricken with marvelous gifts ranging from a magical typewriter, ballpoint pen, or winnowing basket, to the more standard folk amulet" (S. Reyes 1980, 20). Freak characters included Phantomanok (part phantom, part rooster), Darko (a satyr), Petra (a girl with the body of a horse), women with snakes or rats as their twins, a three-headed girl, talking dolphins, and others, some of which (such as Lastikman, Kapteyn Barbell, and Bulko) were copies of American comics figures. These fantasy stories were further broken down into separate genres, including magic and the macabre. It was common to mix story modes and to blend mythologies and heroes. Marcelo (1988) wrote about this tendency: "When komiks started in the late 1940s, artists and writers mixed up Roman, Greek,



FIG. 10.8. *Topstar*, a love/romance comic book. October 7, 1988.

and Philippine mythology. The people in barrios had no idea where this [was] coming from originally. They were thinking it was all created by Filipinos, not Greeks or Romans. . . . Basically the way komiks creators approach the medium is to jumble up all types of heroes. . . . The public laps that up."

As elsewhere, love and romance was a favorite topic among Filipinas, who liked sugarcoted stories that pitted good against evil and concluded with a requisite happy ending. These girls' comic books bulged with stories of the long-suffering mother, the eternal triangle, the daughter who gives up personal happiness to serve her family, the woman victimized by her lover, the kind-hearted prostitute, and the orphan persecuted by her stepmother. Soledad Reyes (1980, 22; also 1986) wrote





FIG. 10.9. Elena Patron, an incredibly prolific komiks novelist.

that extraordinary powers were attributed to love: “[O]veraged babies, thumb sucking men and women, ugly ducklings, and effeminate men are transformed overnight into men and women of pride and self-confidence, deeply conscious of their sexuality.” Many love-romance stories were set in Manila’s slums, thus tying them to social and economic factors and turning the love to bitterness and disillusion.

Other popular genres were epic hero komiks, appearing as early as the 1930s; James-Bond-type spy komiks; and sports stories, usually imagining Filipino athletes as world champions. Real (although ordinary) people were often featured in the stories; readers were asked to submit their life experiences, which writers and artists then proceeded to make “unreal.” Humor komiks—often spin-offs of TV shows or imitations of *Mad* magazine—were not Filipinos’ favorites, exceptions being spoofs written by Nonoy Marcelo; parodies of Bruce Lee (*Brute Lee*), Rocky (*Roque II*), and Muhammad Ali (*Muhimud Ali*), all by Luis Calixto; and a takeoff on Forbes Park, one of Manila’s wealthiest neighborhoods, *Tipin of Pobres Park*. Popular pseudoscience komiks presented the usual futuristic and space adventures, but also themes such as heart and limb transplants, cloning, and test-tube babies. Writers such as Patron, Calixto, and Ed Plaza often took a news item and fashioned it into a mixture of fact and fancy (mostly the latter) that might be perpetuated in a komik for a year or more. Patron, along with Nerissa Cabral, Gilda Olvidado, Pat V. Reyes, and Helen Meriz, were pioneers in opening the male-dominated komiks field to women. These women were

extremely prolific writers; by the 1990s, Patron, Cabral, and Olvidado were each writing fourteen episodes of continuing novels weekly. Cabral alone wrote an astronomical 350 plus illustrated short stories, more than 90 prose short stories, and 120 komiks novels, all in her first twenty years as a komiks writer.

As the 1980s dawned, tear-jerking melodrama, with an emphasis on sex, violence, class division, and family turmoil, was favored in both komiks and cinema. Also, pocket komiks had a boost, as new titles in the standard seven by ten-and-three-quarter-inch format appeared. Atlas, Rex, and GASI strengthened their lists as komiks continued to be the favorite reading fare of Filipinos into the 1990s. Forty-seven komiks (not counting at least twenty-four bomba, as well as religious and educational titles) were published in the mid-1980s, with an estimated weekly<sup>7</sup> total circulation of 2.5 to 3 million and a readership six times that figure, the latter the highest of all forms of print media in the Philippines.

The commingling of komiks and movies that was common in the Philippines benefited both industries immensely. At a time when the Philippine film industry produced upward of 160 feature-length films yearly, komiks were a major content provider, accounting for an estimated 30 to 40 percent of the big studios’ scripts in 1986. One of the Philippines’ most noted directors, Lino Brocka (1986), explained: “It is understandable to use komiks as it is a presold audience.” Brocka felt that the close relationship between the two media provided cinema with a ready-made audience, directors with sufficient money to finance better-quality, festival-bound films, and komiks with a continued readership. Komiks were good script material because they related to the so-called *bakya* public (clog-wearing common people; Avellana 1965, 1986) and their problems and fantasies, thus ensuring box-office success. Melodrama, romantic comedy, other genres of comedy, and adventure fantasy (encompassing action and action drama) particularly suited the screen (E. Reyes 1989, 73), most often mixed together in convoluted stories, mixtures of “*Dallas*, *Dynasty*, rapes, abortions, accidents, catastrophes all rolled into one like a soap opera” (Brocka 1986). To



survive as a director, Brocka made one komiks-based movie with box-office appeal for every artistic one. Film director Romy Suzara (1986) of Viva Productions stated that box office hits normally came from komiks or radio stories, explaining: “We don’t wait till serialization is done. As long as it has a good sell, we get the komiks story.” Other movie personnel, such as directors Manuel “Fyke” Cinco (1986) and Peque Gallaga and actor Jimmy Fabregas, agreed, telling how the process occurred. Gallaga (1986) said: “Most movies are from the comic books. You have an idea, sell it to the komiks, they do the books, and in the last few weeks of the serialization, you bring out the movie version.” Fabregas (1986) gave examples of different ways of conversions: movie personnel developed scripts from plots they read in komiks, or planted stories in komiks that were made into films before the serialization ended. “Some producers will do a story from scratch—make the character in the komiks look like a movie star and then commission the star to play the movie role,” he said. Prominent cartoonist Nonoy Marcelo (1988) looked askance at the latter method, because the komiks writer and movie personnel share the profits, leaving out the artists.<sup>8</sup>

There were other schemes. Sometimes, producers bought komiks serials and paid scriptwriters to provide the endings, often giving the komiks and film versions different conclusions. But scriptwriter José “Pete” Lacaba (1986) said that such practices hurt the scriptwriting profession. “Some writers specialize in adapting komiks, and their presence limits scriptwriters who are forced to compete; they have to use this same formula adapted from komiks that the audience has grown used to,” he said. Another veteran scriptwriter, Ricky Lee (1986), said that he did not like komiks but realized that their prevalence must be acknowledged. In recent years, komiks have lost much of this profitable connection with cinema as the growing prevalence of U.S. movies has squeezed local production to as low as 10–15 percent of the peak years.

As can be surmised from the above, a large percentage of komiks in the Philippines was controlled by Ramon Roces until recent times. Of seventy-one komiks

published in the Philippines in 1992, sixty-two came from komiks companies owned by Roces, including the country’s four best-selling comic books (*Love Life*, *Aliwan*, *Pinoy Klasiks*, and *Pinoy Komiks*), each published twice weekly with a circulation between 200,000 and 250,000. Roces’s *Pilipino Komiks* was also published twice weekly in 1992; nearly all other sixty-six komiks were weeklies.

Approaching the end of the twentieth century, komiks had settled into a consistent pattern concerning their size, contents, and titles. The average book was thirty-two to forty-eight pages and typically contained several wakasans and nobelas as well as an assortment of extras (crosswords, drawing lessons, gag cartoons, etc.). The latter varied widely according to the whims of editors (Martinez 1992)—from movie gossip columns or pen pal sections to biographical sketches or views on current events, to items providing tips on household maintenance, health and cleanliness, and spiritual matters.

The titles of komiks stories, often intriguing, were kept simple and relevant for bakya readers. Some were adapted from generic terms (e.g., Carlo Caparas’s *Bakekang* from *bakekong*, a fishing contraption; the bubonic plague as the source of Helen Meriz’s *Bubonika*, about a girl with the face of a mouse); others were coined words (Ed Plaza’s novel *Dabiana* about an extremely fat woman); and still others were associated with already popular figures (Caparas’s *Supermanugang* after *Superman*, Rod Santiago’s *Badman* from *Batman*, and *Dolsky*, named for the popular Filipino comedian Dolphy). *Simplicio Sampera*, a novel about a simple man who found a purse that provided him with money whenever he wanted it, represented the common practice among Filipinos of attaching to their first names their most outstanding characteristic or calling. Many komiks titles were in English or Spanish: *Superstar*, *Topstar*, *Universal*, *United*, *Movie Specials*, *Espesyal*, *Diamante*, and *Kampeon* (Marcelo 1980: 38–39).

Important changes in readers’ preferences occurred in the early 1990s. The love and romance theme was most popular, accounting for 53 percent of the stories among

122 nobelas and wakasans in the top ten komiks (Pontenila 1992). This phenomenon was explained by Emmanuel Martinez (1992), a colleague of Roces, who said:

Filipinos are very fond of love stories. Filipinos basically are romantic, emotional, family oriented. In their love stories, they favor romantic, happy endings, a happy mood—no depressing endings, no hanging [unresolved] ending. In horror, they like horrifying (like a snake man, *The Hands*, ugly woman *Angelica*), ugly characters, the bloody, the gory (stomachs hanging out), zombies. In comedy, they prefer comical situations especially in illustrations, comical characters. No political satire usually but there is some in these books.

Martinez (1992) thought that an understanding of komiks was closely tied to understanding the Philippine economy, because “[l]ife is simple here; the standard of living is basically barely enough. All these komiks stories reflected the Filipino family . . . Filipino life.” The long-popular supernovel lost some of its appeal by the 1990s, because audiences could not afford to buy the komiks for weeks or years until their stories were complete, especially when television provided the satisfaction of completed stories in individual programs. Martinez (1992) said that more than half of GASI’s titles were in short story format, but the novels were not completely abandoned as fifty serialized stories were still running in seventeen GASI comic books.

The quality of komiks also deteriorated by the late 1980s. Scriptwriter and scholar Clodualdo del Mundo Jr. (1986, 183) explained the lowering of standards, saying that the passion of earlier komiks creators was gone, economies of scale in the industry had saturated the market with writers and illustrators speeding up production at the expense of quality, and the Roces monopoly had kept out other companies not capable of following its formula of producing komiks cheaply and quickly. Marcelo (1988) concurred, calling comics creation in the late-twentieth-century Philippines “a slapdash thing.” Reacting to comments that the collapse of komiks could be blamed on everything from

the eruption of Mount Pinatubo to the insurrection in Mindanao, another cartoonist, Gerry Alanguilan (2005) said that the most important reason was simply the “poorly made and substandard comic books they published in the last few years.” Velasquez (1988) cited rushed work because of the augmented frequency of komiks, but added that less dialogue in comics contributed to the lowering of quality.

Some writers and illustrators worked at breakneck speed to increase output, Carlo Caparas claiming that during one period he wrote thirty-six weekly series regularly (Roxas and Arevalo 1985, 99). Illustrators usually drew five to eight weekly series, although Mar T. Santana managed to churn out, in assembly-line fashion, seventeen series (nineteen episodes) each week. He sketched and outlined faces, leaving dialogue, ink details, and background to others. Low pay and payment on a per piece basis forced such volume on creators (Martinez 1992).

Other factors have seriously affected the komiks industry since the 1990s. Sporadically, economic and political turmoil, as well as disruptive natural disasters, drained Filipinos’ finances and prevented them from buying komiks, particularly the long, drawn-out nobelas. Also, Philippine komiks lost some of their huge readership to other diversions such as television, video, gaming, the Internet, and foreign comic books. As Velasquez said, the rise of consumerism and a middle class in the closing decades of the century meant that more families could afford television sets, computers, and other luxuries, and as the quality of komiks deteriorated, readers sought their entertainment through these new media (Villegas 2007, 61). Martinez, who edited the monopolistic GASI komiks, added heightened levels of commercialism and cutthroat competition to the list of trends detrimental to komiks publishing, saying that some publishers went into komiks strictly for commercial reasons. Martinez also said, the fact that seventy-one titles were being published by five companies in 1992 made for a keen competitiveness that was not always good for the industry (Martinez 1992). Lawrence Mijares, however, felt that the real reason for the komiks’ downfall was the

Ramon Roces family. By the early 1990s, Atlas and GASI were the only major komiks companies remaining from the five mentioned by Martinez, both owned at that time by Roces daughters. Mijares said that all GASI titles enjoyed the preferential treatment offered by the Roces's nationwide distribution system, which at the same time kept komiks competitors from penetrating the market. With this "overwhelming coercive monopoly" also controlling content, new ideas languished while old concepts were mercilessly rehashed (Mijares 2007, 53). Another critic summed up the situation, saying: "When the Roces comics monopoly fell in the late 1990s, it took everything with it" (Isip 2007, 5).

Finally, other severe problems of the industry have been: (1) *bangketa* (newsstand) dealers rented rather than sold komiks, depriving publishers of income; (2) the best creators drifted to more lucrative jobs or went abroad when they were not paid well (see Tiu 2001), leaving the field to mediocre, untalented writers and artists; and (3) the industry did not keep up with the technology, continuing to print on cheap paper and using archaic color separation processes (Mijares 2007, 52; see also Valiente and Salvador 2007).

The end result of these dilemmas was that the old-style komiks had lost their appeal by the late twentieth century, and some of the longest-running titles in comics history anywhere died—*Pilipino*, *Tagalog*, *Espesyal*, and *Hiwaga* together had issued about 11,500 consecutive issues (Alanguilan 2007a). What took their place were independent fanzines and comic books, what became known as Pinoy manga, and graphic novels.

In the early 1990s, aspiring comics artists began to publish their books independently of the traditional industry, usually at local photocopy centers, paying only for the limited number of copies (about one hundred) that they could afford "out of their own pockets" (Alanguilan 2006). This trend has continued; in 2010, the majority of the one hundred new titles were photocopy editions. Often, these drawers/writers of the 1990s gathered in small groups to compare work and share ideas; their comics, mostly in the superhero genre, were sold at university fairs (Fondevilla 2007, 445).

Alamat (Legend) Comics was such a group project, originating in October 1994, based around a comics shop that sponsored a convention for anyone with a comic book to show. Seven groups participated, taking turns occupying the only two exhibition tables provided. The following month, Whilce Portacio, who had found success working abroad for U.S. comics companies, returned to the Philippines and met with representatives of a dozen groups, admonishing them not to compete against one another but to cooperate (Tan 2007, 48). Subsequently, the groups organized themselves as Alamat Comics, held an exhibition in February 2005, and published the first issue of *Alamat 101 Comics* in English and Tagalog in December 1995.

Occasionally, bigger presses republished the photocopied minicomics. Budjette Tan's *Trese: Murder on Balete Drive* was such a photocopied minicomic, picked up by Visual Print Enterprises, which published the seven stories in two volumes (Lim 2008). Alanguilan's *Wasted*, his own story of his breakup with his girlfriend, was done as an underground photocopied comic book series of eight issues before being published by Alamat Comics in 1998 and then serialized in *Pulp Magazine* in 2002 (see Lique 2007; Olivares 1996; Chan 2005). Alanguilan gave away fifteen copies of the minicomic to friends for their reactions, and he was reluctant to have it published in *Comics 101* because the content was so personal.

Alanguilan has been a spearhead of the new wave of comic books. His goals have been to revive the country's rich komiks tradition; to unify and encourage young creators and make them aware of Philippine komiks classics through his online museum, the Komikero Group, and his website; and to keep up his own prodigious production locally through his own company, while continuing to work for U.S. comics firms.

Japanese manga and anime also helped generate renewed interest in comic art in the Philippines. Anime was very popular in the Philippines until President Marcos banned the shows in the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> It returned by the late 1990s, at the same time that manga (*Culture Crash* and *Questor*, both 2000) began to be commercially





FIG. 10.10. The manga-influenced *Mango Jam*. Courtesy of Boboy and Guia Yonzon.

produced in the Philippines. *Culture Crash* folded for economic reasons in 2004, as did *Questor* soon after. But the manga influence remained as new titles, highly imitative of the Japanese style, appeared. These included *Mango Jam*, a bimonthly in shōjō (Japanese girls' comics) style, published by Mango Comics; the Mangaholix series of five titles, based on Philippine folklore and set in Manila but drawn in manga style (Garcia 2008); and books by Stephen Redondo (*Redondo Komix*), NEO, Nautilus Comics (*Cast*), and others.

Filipino manga are most often published in color, using both English and Tagalog and incorporating a wide range of themes. Herbeth Fondevilla (2007, 446) claimed that Philippine manga is popular with females in the eight- to twenty-five-year-old age bracket, who purchase the books at specialty comics stores and bookstores.

As elsewhere, opinions vary concerning the Filipinos' adoption of the manga style. Alanguilan (2007b, 99)

opposed using a style so uniquely a product of Japanese history and culture and then calling it "Philippine-made comics." He felt that local cartoonists were no longer developing their own styles. Melvin Calingo (2007) thought otherwise, finding it "strange and utterly unfounded" that by accepting manga, Filipinos were adopting and promoting a foreign culture. The major difference between Japanese and Philippine manga, according to Calingo, was the audience; he also pointed to the unique qualities of Pinoy manga that are nonexistent in Japan, such as Philippine cultural and linguistic nuances and local settings; an orientation toward the Filipino youth subculture as opposed to Japanese manga's orientation toward the mainstream; and the inclusion of Philippine humor, drama, and cultural values, even in fantasy stories. Joel Chua (2007) said that imitating manga was a pragmatic decision, because more work opportunities opened up for those working in that style. As it has done throughout Asia, the Japanese government has promoted manga in the Philippines as a valuable cultural and financial export (Caber 2007).

The graphic novel has helped save Philippine komiks, which is ironic in that long-running romance nobela komiks (somewhat similar to graphic novels) had earlier damaged the industry when they all folded, because the weakened economy at that time prevented low-income readers from purchasing the komiks over the extended time required to follow their story lines (De Vera 2008). Although more expensive than individual issues of the nobelas, graphic novels are complete in themselves. Comic artists such as Arnold Arre (*The Mythology Class*, *After Eden*, and *Trip to Tagaytay*), Carlo Vergara (*One Night in Purgatory* and *Ang Kagilagilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni Zsa Zsa Zaturnnah* [The amazing adventures of Zsa Zsa Zaturnnah]), and Budjette Tan (*Trese: Murder on Balet Drive*) have recently produced graphic novels. As elsewhere, Philippine graphic novels have appeared in various formats, whether anthologies (*Siglo*), collections of works in a miniseries (*The Mythology Class*), or individual titles. Topics vary from the fictional crime cases of *Trese: Murder on Balet Drive* to a real-life tribute to slain

senator Benigno S. Aquino Jr., done by his grandson, Jiggy Aquino-Cruz (De Vera 2008).

In an effort to bring back low-cost Tagalog *masa komiks*, Mango Comics and Sterling Paper Products (a diversified business conglomerate that manufactures notebooks among other products) joined up in 2007 to issue traditional-style Filipino komiks, publishing titles such as *Tagalog Komiks*, *Estudyante Komiks*, *Gwapo Komiks*, *Klasik Komiks*, *Super Funny Komiks*, *Pilipino Komiks*, and *OKW Super Stories* as well as *MNK* and *Joe d'Mango's Lovenotes*. Each title was printed in runs of seventy-five thousand to one hundred thousand copies weekly (Alanguilan 2008), with release dates staggered so that a new issue appeared every day of the week. The Sterling-Mango relationship lasted only a few months. Veteran komiks writer and film director Carlo Caparas was involved in the Sterling project (his name preceded each of the titles), and, together with his actress wife Donna Villa, he initiated other projects for the revival of komiks such as awarding prizes for the most promising new comics creators and, in 2007, helping found the National Komiks Congress and the Komiks Caravan, both sponsored by the government through the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA). The idea of the caravan was for Caparas and Villa to lead a script-writing seminar tour around the Philippines (Pulumbirit 2007; see also Maragay 2007). The congress sponsored an exhibition at the NCCA, which then traveled around Manila and the rest of the country. These projects did not fully materialize, as Caparas became embroiled in much controversy: first, the Supreme Court denied him a National Artist award conferred by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo because of petitions from fellow artists and other parties; and second, in 2010, he was charged with tax evasion.

The norm throughout the 2000s has been for individual creators to establish companies to publish their own works as well as others, and to commission projects from foreign and local publishers. Gilbert Monsanto set up Sacred Mountain, which issued his *Rambol* and *Tropa* comic books (both 2006), whose stories have a “tinge” of Western influence even though, according

to Monsanto, “their personalities, everything about them is Filipino” (Salazar 2008). Alanguilan, through his Komikero Publishing company, has published his four *Elmer* comic books, featuring a family of chickens who are endowed with human emotions, consciousness, and awareness; and Vergara and Arre write, draw, and publish their own books. By 2006, other companies had been established, such as Summit, a publisher of licensed foreign comics reprints; PSI-Com Publishing, doing mostly foreign reprints and a few Filipino anthologies; Nautilus, with only a handful of original titles in English for the upscale market; and Mango Comics (Isip 2007, 65).

Some independent comics were strongly influenced by manga, such as *Marco Dimaano's K.I.A.*, *Abono Digest*, and *Istrong Republik*; others were done specifically for university and comics (mostly manga) fairs, one example being *Kubori Kikiam* by Melvin Calingo and Michael David, about a band of *kikiam* (a popular elongated fried snack on a stick) pitted against fish balls and squid balls (also snack items). Popular magazines also provided outlets for independent comics artists. Alanguilan's *The Marvelous Adventures of the Amazing Dr. Rizal* and *Humans Rex* were serialized in the pop culture magazine *Fudge* (Callueng 2007); his *Wasted: Final Edition* and *Tales of the Big City* appeared in *Pulp Magazine*; and his adventure graphic novel *Timawa* was printed in the show business gossip magazine *Buzz Magasin*. Alanguilan and other comics creators draw comics stories for ABS/CBN Publishing's *Sindak! Horror-Thriller Magazine*.

Some classic stories and characters have been repopularized and published by Mango Comics (and, briefly, Sterling). The husband-and-wife team of Boboy and Guia Yonzon, owners of Mango Comics (established 2001), has published comics for upscale audiences, selling them in specialty stores as opposed to newsstands and on the street. Guia Yonzon (2007), general manager of Mango Comics, said that, for the project with Sterling, she sought out the “old style drawers,” most of whom were “very poor.” However, earlier, in 2003 and 2004, the Yonzons had obtained the rights to reprint Mars Ravelo's *Darna* and *Lastikman*, classic superhero

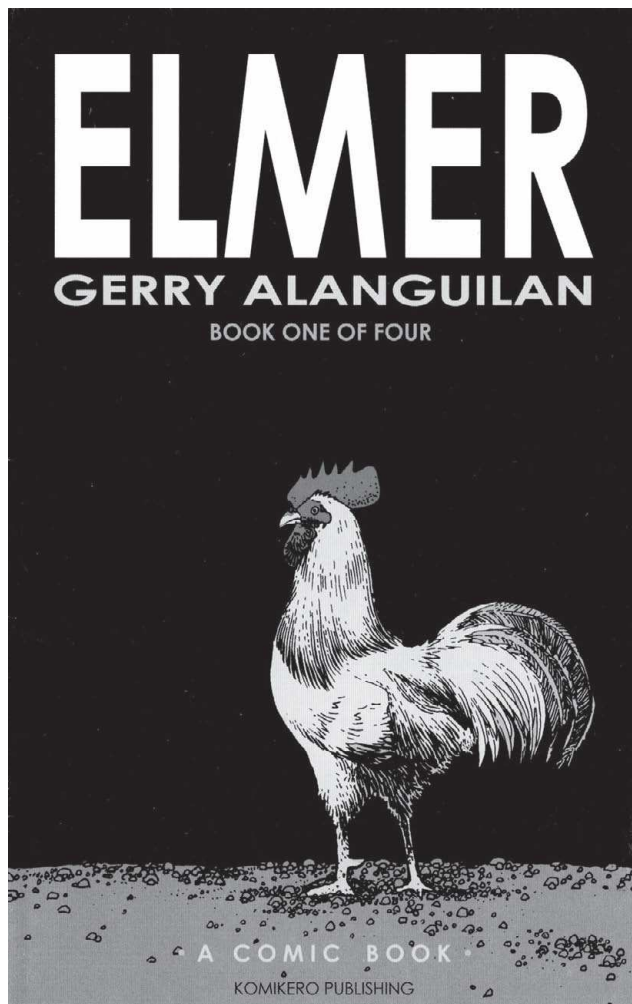


FIG. 10.11. *Elmer*, the first of four books on a humanized chicken, by Gerry Alanguilan, who spearheaded the revival of *komiks* in the Philippines. Courtesy of Gerry Alanguilan.

komiks from about fifty years before. Darna, perhaps the most popular hero in Philippine comics history, is a poor, frail, coy provincial girl who, in times of danger, swallows a magic stone and turns into a “brawny bra-and-bikini-clad superhuman defender of the oppressed” (Capino 2005, 45). Lastikman, a second-tier superhero in a previous komiks life, was elevated to a spot alongside Darna and Kapteyn Barbell in his reincarnation under Mango. Alanguilan (2006), who rewrote the story, said that although the original characters and stories were kept intact, new touches were added, a lighter tone was adopted, and a new female character, Atomika, was introduced. Mango Comics has moved in other directions in recent years. In 2008, the company signed a five-year contract with the government’s

Department of Science and Technology to publish four issues yearly of *Tron*, a comic book for children (Guia Yonzon 2008; also Boboy and Guia Yonzon 2007; Boboy Yonzon 2008).

The Philippines’ long and vibrant history of komiks crossovers has carried over into the twenty-first century, with a number of classic and some new komiks stories being adapted for television series and films, most earning high ratings. Some komik characters have become quite familiar in film and on television. Darna, whose license now belongs to the Yonzons, appeared in a series on GMA-TV in 2005 and has featured in at least ten films<sup>10</sup> over four decades as well as earlier TV series, commercials, a ballet production, much merchandise, and a pop song, “Hindi Ako Si Darna” (I am not Darna) (Flores 2004, 5; see also Brillon 2007, 108). *Dyesebel*, the story of a mermaid who falls in love with a man and later is transformed into a human being, was televised in 2007; the character had been the subject of at least five remakes and one spin-off since 1953 (Capino 2005, 38). Other classics reworked for television since the mid-2000s have included Ravelo’s *Lastikman* and *Kapteyn Barbell*; Caparas’s *Bakekang*; *Pedro Penduko*, one of Francisco Coching’s fifty novels that made it to the big screen (see Pulumbirit 2007); and *Kampanerang Kuba* by Pablo Gomez, another artist whose komiks were frequently adapted into movie fare. Recent original fantasies such as *Mulawin*, *Encantadia*, and *Atlantika* have also made it onto the TV screen.

By now, it is evident that Philippine comics in the twenty-first century are very different from their predecessors in terms of artistry, technology, outside influences, types of stories and formats, audience, and distribution methods. Current trends include the publication of Pinoy manga, graphic novels, and classic komiks in new settings and styles; the adaptation of komiks to other media; and the increased recognition and respect afforded to the art form. The production of komiks has become more professional; there are now several conventions devoted to comics, anime, and gaming (at least eight were staged in 2010 alone); websites and blogs have proliferated, the most important being



Komikero, which also hosts an online comics museum; many more exhibitions are staged, such as retrospectives of Ravelo's and Coching's komiks; and awards are granted more frequently, such as those sponsored by Komikon and other conventions. In 2009, PICCA, an annual international comics and animation festival sponsored by Hugo and Guia Yonzon, was inaugurated with a forum, exhibitions, an award ceremony, a trade fair, workshops, and a drawing session by Filipino cartoonists. Alanguilan has endeavored to preserve old komiks and introduce them and their masters to young artists by posting them on his online gallery; in 2010, a legislative bill was proposed to establish the Philippine National Graphic Novel Archive.

Such activity augurs well for a comic art tradition that, perhaps excepting only Japan and Hong Kong, had the strongest audience appeal, best-known cartooning geniuses, and most varied comics content of any Asian country.

and *Pioneer Komiks*. A circulation of two hundred thousand is good enough for a magazine to be a leader."

6. Filipino comics artists and writers are working with American companies again; some live in the United States (such as Rod Espinosa, Leinil Francis Yu, and Jay Anacleto), while others submit work to top U.S. comics publishers from their Philippine homes (Gerry Alanguilan, Wilson Tortosa, Carlo Pagulan, etc.). Whilce Portacio, who was raised in the United States, is coowner of the California-based Avalon Studios, where both American and Philippine titles are produced (see *Manila Times* 1998).

7. Some komiks were published twice a week (*Wakasan*, *Pilipino*, *Aliwan*, *Hiwaga*, and *Extra*).

8. Artists normally were subordinate to writers in the komiks, notable exceptions being the teams of Clodualdo del Mundo/Fred Carrillo and Francisco V. Coching/Federico Javinal (Cabling 1972).

9. Herbeth Fondevilla (2007, 445) attributed the ban to rising political tension between government and private television companies; Marcos's attempt to forestall revolution, as activists could use anime as a means to communicate; and the protection of children from accidents, lest they try to imitate anime action in real life.

10. Cherish Aileen A. Brillon (2007, 98) gave the number of Darna films as fifteen. She said that an animated GMA-TV series was aired in 1989.

## Notes

1. Actually, Tony Velasquez published a ninety-five-page album book in 1934, *Album ng Kabalbalan ni Kenkoy*.
2. During this heyday, one hundred different komiks titles with a total circulation of three million (readership, eighteen million) appeared weekly. They were popular because of their content, which was appealing to the masses, their full-color format, and their cheap price (equivalent to the cost of one soft drink) (Maslog 2007, 190–91).
3. Comic books are still used in the Philippines to promote development and education and to raise social consciousness. Since 1980, the Communication Foundation for Asia has issued Tagalog and English editions of the bimonthly *Gospel Comics*. More recently, in 2008, the Commission on Filipinos Overseas Task Force against Human Trafficking sponsored a comics scriptwriting contest on migration, and comic books issued by Adolescent Health Issues and Perspectives tackled issues of teen pregnancy, puberty, and adolescent sexuality (Buban 2008).
4. Pablo S. Gomez (2008) said that PSG was started in 1962.
5. Tony Velasquez (1988) took credit for establishing both GASI and Atlas along with many of their magazines, stating: "I started all of these books—*Pilipino Komiks*, *Tagalog Klasiks*, *Hiwaga Komiks*, and *Espesyal Komiks*, all leaders of Atlas. We started Graphic Arts Services also, with its leaders, *Pinoy Komiks*, *Pinoy Klasiks*, *Holiday Komiks*,

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As with other bifurcated Asian countries, finding the starting point for Singaporean cartooning is a challenge; the city-state's history was long intertwined with that of Malaysia, and, as a result, Singaporean and Malaysian cultural forms, including comic art, were likewise intertwined. At times during the past few decades (and to some degree today), cartoonists from the two countries have worked interchangeably, and production and distribution systems as well as periodical publishing have also been connected.

Generally, the revolutionary daily *Chong Shing Yit Pao* is credited with publishing the first Chinese cartoon in Singapore. Within three weeks of its inception in 1907 as the local organ of Dr. Sun Yat-sen's Tung Meng Hui (Chinese Revolutionary Alliance), the newspaper regularly published a cartoon on its literary page, *Fei Fei* (Chen 1967, 98–99). Lim Cheng Tju (2007b, 183) reported a total of forty-one such cartoons published from September 9, 1907, to March 21, 1908, when they ceased, perhaps because the ruling British had threatened the editors with deportation for seditious agitation against the Chinese monarchy (Yong 1991, 31). All the cartoons were anti-Qing Dynasty and most were unsigned. The content of the cartoons was more important than the drawing style, which was often crude; and, as Lim (2007b, 186) wrote, the cartoons were “hardly funny,” although they cleverly used word play.

Other newspapers, such as the reformist *Union Times* and the conservative *Lat Pau*, quickly followed *Chong Shing Yit Pao*'s lead, but the cartoons they used were irregular in frequency and often foreign reprints. Lim (2007b: 188) attributed this shortcoming to the lack of a talent pool in Singapore, pointing out that the first known cartoonist in Singapore was a “sojourner from China.”

With the overthrow of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, cartoons in Singaporean Chinese newspapers focused on warlordism and, later, Japanese aggression in China, because overseas Chinese until after World War II were more concerned with what was happening in their “mother” country than in their actual place of residence. For example, the initial cartoons in *Kuo Min Yit Poh*

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## Chapter 11

# Singapore



FIG. 11.1. "Corrupt Ching Officials." *Chong Shing Yit Pao*, 1907.

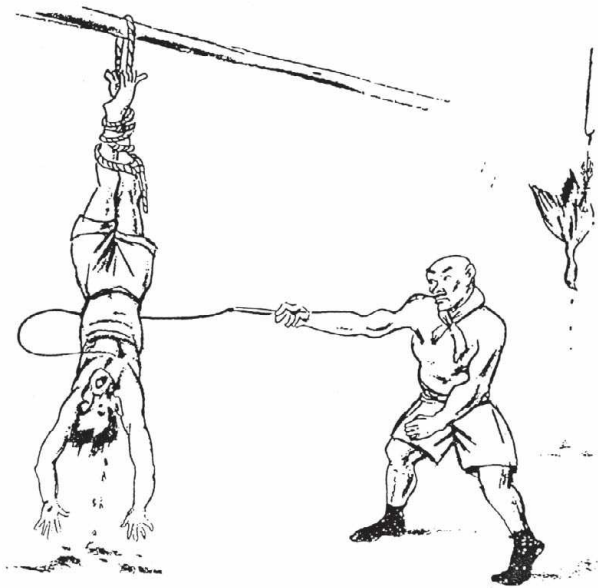


FIG. 11.2. One of the torture cartoons in Liu Kang's *Chop Suey*, a collection about the Japanese occupation of Singapore. 1946.

(1914–1919), the organ of the Singapore Kuomintang Party, attacked Yuan Shikai, a former Qing general desirous of reviving dynastic rule in China. Later, many of the *Kuo Min Yit Poh* cartoons were contributed by overseas Chinese artist Zhu Man.

At least from the time of China's May 4 movement in 1919, there were strong connections between cartoons and woodcuts in Singapore, with China-educated woodcut artists dabbling in cartoons and vice versa. Woodprints and cartoons were used in political consciousness raising, encouraged by the China-based intellectual and writer Lu Xun. The interconnectiveness of woodcuts

and cartoons was evident in the 1935 and 1936 *Nanyang Siang Pao* art supplements "Wenman Gie" (World of culture and cartoons) and "Jinri Art" (Today's art), both edited by Dai Yunlang. In those supplements, woodcuts and cartoons were discussed with revolutionary fervor (C. T. Lim 2001, 60).<sup>1</sup>

In the late 1930s, Singaporean cartoonists rallied around China by participating in anti-Japanese campaigns, drawing cartoons and organizing a few exhibitions. Lim (2007a, 253) claimed that "many prominent cartoonists" who contributed to the war effort were killed by the Japanese military. At the war's end, cartoons in Singapore shifted from an emphasis on China to local issues, particularly colonialism and the independence struggle.<sup>2</sup> Partly responsible for this change was *Chop Suey*, a collection of cartoons about the Japanese occupation of Singapore, drawn by Liu Kang and issued in 1946 in both English and Chinese editions (see also C. T. Lim 2005).

Many of the cartoons in the Chinese press of Singapore after 1950 dealt with societal and political upheavals, such as the economic recession, the Malayan Emergency against communism, attacks on Chinese schools, and other social injustices and cruelties. Cartoonists emphasized values and morals, forwarding the notion that cartoons could bring about social change. In 1953, high school teacher Qiu Gao Peng incorporated that mission in the weekly comic strip *Mr. Nonsense*, which he had been asked to draw for the newspaper *Nanyang Siang Pao*. Three years earlier, Qiu had created a Sanmao-like character called Wang Er, but *Mr. Nonsense* differed in that he brought sensitive issues to the surface (C. T. Lim 2014). *Mr. Nonsense* disappeared after October 31, 1955, when the strip likened Singaporean political leaders to pigs and even Adolf Hitler.

Overall, cartoons were popular newspaper/magazine fare in the 1950s, due in part to their ease of reproduction, their ability to capture the "rich material" that stood out in Singaporean life at the time, and the increased number of periodicals in which they could appear (C. T. Lim 2014). These new periodicals included the student publications *Shidaipao* and the *University Tribune*.



However, cartoons in the English- and Chinese-language press changed significantly in the ensuing years as the authoritarianism of the People's Action Party (PAP) and its head, Lee Kuan Yew, engulfed Singaporean society. The chief English-language daily, the *Straits Times*, dropped political cartoons in 1961; they were resumed eighteen years later in February 1979, but not on a regular basis until the end of 1980. Even then, they reflected, rather than commented, on issues of the day, and they only addressed foreign topics (C. T. Lim, quoted in H. K. Lee 1999, 4). In the Chinese newspapers, by the 1970s editorial cartoonists such as Koh Sia Yong, Wenyi, and Kefu had also distanced themselves from local affairs. Lee Kuan Yew's infamous purge of the Singaporean press in 1971, resulting in publisher and editor arrests and newspaper closings, halted any remnants of critical comment that remained (see Lent 1975), including that of cartoonist Morgan Chua, who had been working on the daily *Singapore Herald*, one of the three dailies affected.

As Cheng Tju Lim (2014) pointed out, cartoonists were targeted even when they steered away from politics, because of the "inherent satirical and subversive nature of the medium." He cited the example of Lim Mu Hoe, who, upon joining *Nanyang Siang Pao* as art editor in 1969, created a cartoon character, Lao Lao, which he modeled after himself to avoid offending public sensitivities. Nevertheless, readers complained about his cartoons, especially when they spoofed Singaporean self-proclaimed artists (C. T. Lim 2014). To the present day, avoiding local political issues and people, serving nation building, and joking only about certain foreign or unimportant matters remain the creed by which Singaporean cartoonists work.

### Comic Strips

In the 1960s and 1970s, domestic newspaper comic strips were rare, short-lived, and poorly done. Comic strip artist-turned-editor Cheah Sin Ann (1992) said that, until the 1980s, anyone could be a cartoonist at

the *Straits Times*, where he was employed for many years. "Some old-timers were office staff who moved into graphics, with the result being low-grade strips," Cheah said. Although the Chinese dailies normally have had more local strips, individual titles have not had long runs. Veteran cartoonist Heng Kim Song (1992) explained: "Local cartoonists are young; they want an international audience immediately. As a result, they lose touch with the local audience wanting a Singaporean flavor and after a year or two, they give up because they are not accepted by the public."

A breakthrough came in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the *Straits Times* publishing firm decided to give play to domestic cartooning and, in the process, hired six cartoonists. Although the daily *Straits Times* continued to use exclusively foreign strips except for Cheah Sin Ann's *The House of Lim*, nearly half the Sunday edition's four comics pages were devoted to local strips. Some of these, which appeared at varying times in roughly a three-year period, included the supernatural strip *Souls*, based on Malay and Chinese ghost stories and created by Chan Man Loon; *Kiasu and Gang* by Johnny Lau et al.; *Crocko*, featuring an environment-friendly cockroach, by Victor Teh; *The Huntsman*, an adventure story à la Flash Gordon, by Melvin Yong and Lee Hon Kit; the science fiction story *Speedsword and the Doomsday Pearl* by Lee Yeow Heng; *Life's Like That* by Lee Chee Chew; *The House of Lim* by Cheah; and *Mr. Mundane*, a commentary on life in Singapore, by Koh Cheng Eng.

Other strips were published in the *Straits Times* organization's daily, the *New Paper*. Foremost among them was *Orchard Road*, the country's first daily, English-language newspaper strip. Started in 1998 by then eighteen-year-old Colin Goh, *Orchard Road* lasted three years, ceasing when its creator left to study law in London. Goh's quirky characters often poked fun at Singaporeans' self-perceptions. The *New Paper* ushered in other local strips in 1991–1992 such as Koh Cheng Eng's *School Daze*, based on the artist's spiritual approach to life; Tan Wee Lian's *Aiyoh!*, a spoof of a constantly bickering married couple; Ian Ang's *Puns*, about a family headed



FIG. 11.3. *Life's Like That*, a strip by Lee Chee Chew. *Straits Times*, 1992. Courtesy of Lee Chee Chew.

by a rock fan/guitarist father, and Ken Tan's *Rojak School*, portraying two impossible teenage buddies. In 1991, the *New Paper* showcased the careers of some of these comic strip creators in a column called "Also Can." What stood out about them were their youthfulness, ranging from eighteen to twenty-nine years of age, and their formal education in disciplines other than art (e.g., mechanical engineering, science, accounting, computer science, and law). In fact, some were still students when they began their strips, and a few, such as Colin Goh and Ken Tan, had published compilations of their works in book form before they were twenty-one years old.

Of the *Straits Times* strip cartoonists, only Cheah Sin Ann was full-time, responsible for drawing his strip, *The House of Lim*, seven days a week beginning in 1989 (see Yuen 1991). Reflective of Singapore's national paranoia, originally the title of the strip was to be *The House of Lee*, but the editors changed it for fear that it would be read as a reference to Lee Kuan Yew. *The House of Lim* was a gag continuity strip based on a weekly theme (S. A. Cheah 1992).

By 1992, most *Straits Times* strips were phased out because of the costs (\$\$100 to \$140 per Sunday strip by freelance cartoonists), low-quality work, diminishing

popularity, and editors' disinterest. Cheah Sin Ann (2000) attributed the poor quality of local strips to cartoonists using "very American-based humor" without understanding its language components, and their lack of good writing skills. He said that the popularity of local strips diminished when pitted against those of foreign origin. Discussing his own *The House of Lim*, Cheah (2000) said that the strip was popular during the five or six years that it was gag-oriented, but when he changed to a more British style of wit and added more background and solid blacks to the drawings, the public turned away. He explained that, with the new style, it "took a little more time to digest the punch lines," and that "even the editors thought the strip was too high-brow" and dropped it in 1999.

Space allocated for strips (including foreign) was at a premium by 2000, with the *Sunday (Straits) Times* using only black-and-white, foreign-syndicated comics crammed into two pages. Because editors contracted to purchase packages of strips from the syndicates, they rationalized that all of them had to be printed. At a time when local strips had all but disappeared, it was difficult to fathom the large art staffs that were retained by the *Straits Times* and *Sunday Times* (fifteen people, six of whom were cartoonists/illustrators) and the *New Paper* (eight multitasking artists). Cheah Sin Ann (2000), who supervised the *Straits Times* cartoonists/illustrators, explained that his staff drew illustrations accompanying articles as well as single-panel cartoons, and they were expected to function in both formats. He thought that it was an "Asian mentality" for publishers "to milk" cartoonists dry, but he justified the need for a fifteen-member art staff, saying:

In the U.S., an editor commissions a cartoon from a cartoonist and that's it. But in Singapore, the cartoon must go through many editors. Maybe I would be asked to draw a cartoon on a man who drove his car on the wrong side of the road. Another editor may ask me to change it as he has a different concept of it. Or he may ask for a change because he doesn't think it's funny. The idea is to always

have people on hand with a fifteen-artist staff. So we have artists on duty twenty-four hours a day as minds change and spaces open up and need [to be] filled. *Straits Times* has two editions at 6 a.m. and 8 a.m. We have a regular slot for *Punch Lines* [a one-panel cartoon]; if a story runs long, we must cut *Punch Lines*, and an editor will say come up with a *Chit and Chat*, which is one-half the size of *Punch Lines*. That's why we need so many cartoonists.<sup>4</sup>

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As already stated, the *New Paper* in 2000 used its artists to do many jobs—charts, graphics, logos, maps, and so on. Lee Hup Kheng (Hup) and Colin Goh drew most of the cartoons. Besides editorial cartoons, Hup drew *What's Hup*, a three-panel strip centered around the character Boy Boy, who lived with his grandparents for a year, an experience that Hup had had as a youth. He said: "The strip is about the tension between the little boy and the old folks, and anything is possible. I draw what we take for granted—like cracking our bones, gray hair, picking our noses. Things we do but don't tell others" (Hup 2000). Goh, at the time working on his master's degree in New York, managed to do a four-panel strip, *The Concrete Jungle*, which alternated with *What's Hup*. On Mondays, the *New Paper* published his *Yankee Doodle*, a full page of strips about his adventures in the United States transmitted by fax.

The Chinese-language daily *Lian-He Zao Bao* had featured locally created strips a few years before the *Straits Times* and the *New Paper*, and for a while devoted one-third of a page to them every day. However, because of poor public response and inferior work, most were cut in the early 1990s, leaving only two single-panel daily cartoons. *Lian-He Zao Bao* attempted to cultivate artistic talent by opening two pages every Sunday for the works of amateur cartoonists, who were paid a token fee. By 2000, the space had dwindled to one full page weekly.

Comic strips normally have short lives in Singapore, partly because they concentrate on worn-out slapstick jokes and shy away from more modern or mature topics. More innovative new strips occasionally pop up, sometimes by cartoonists who have already created



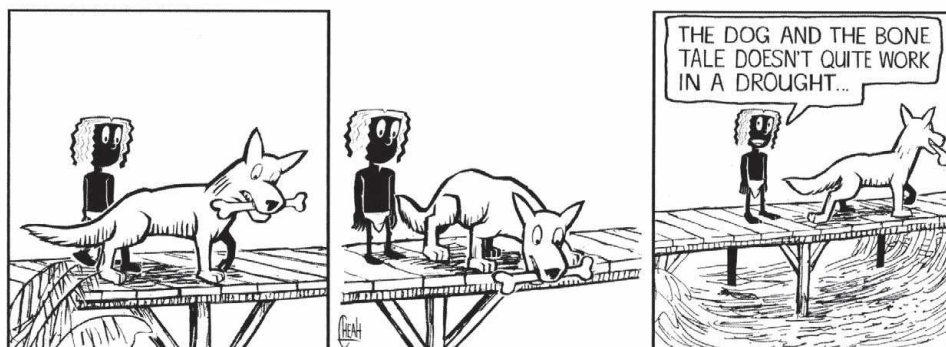
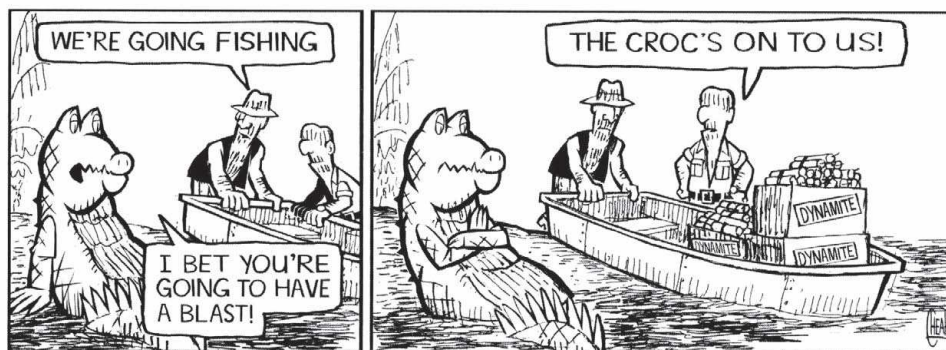


FIG. 11.4. Two of Cheah Sin Ann's *Billy and Saltie* strips. 2010. Courtesy of Cheah Sin Ann.



FIG. 11.5. *Demon-Cratic Singapore* by Leslie Chew. The online strip spoofed Singapore society and politics, leading to the artist's arrest in 2013 for alleged sedition.

successful characters. One such cartoonist is Cheah Sin Ann, who in recent years has peddled self-syndicated works such as *Murphy's In-Law*, about a young, modern, and urban Irish couple; *The Bamboo Curtain*, portraying endangered species in a Chinese forest; and *Billy and Saltie*, the tropical adventures of an aboriginal boy and a saltwater crocodile. Cheah has had limited success getting these strips published in Singaporean newspapers.

Another popular comics creator, Johnny Lau of *Mr. Kiasu* fame, made a comeback in January 2012 with the launch of his weekly strip *Skipping Class* in *Lian-He Zao Bao*. Collaborating with primary school teacher Ang Thiam Poh, who provides "inside information" about schools and schoolchildren, Lau conceptualized a strip about a primary school student who finds that he can travel between parallel school worlds on alternate

days—one a normal, academic pressure cooker and the other wacky and more creative (Lau 2012). The strip lampoons Singaporean society, which Lau (2012) said tends to stifle creativity.

Topics that strip cartoonists do not dare take up in print are addressed in the online *Demon-Cratic Singapore* by Chew 13 (Leslie Chew). Started in 2011, the strip, subtitled “Evil Runs Foul in This ‘Democratic’ Country,” has dealt with very controversial issues and has made fun of political figures such as “Emperor Lee,” “Woody Goh,” “Pink Loong,” “Marlboro Tan,” and others. Located at [www.bitstrips.com](http://www.bitstrips.com), *Demon-Cratic Singapore* includes the disclaimers that “no (decent) politician had been harmed” and “any person claiming any resemblance is definitely insane and ought to be shot on sight for public safety.” In April 2013, Chew was arrested for alleged sedition for a strip that lampooned the Singapore government for racism against minority Malays.

### Comic Books and Graphic Novels

Homegrown comic books were practically nonexistent in Singapore before the 1980s, their arrival coinciding with the *Straits Times*’ elevation of comic strips. Before then, comic book culture in Singapore revolved around imports, mainly from the United States, Hong Kong, and Japan. Different reasons account for this situation: comic books were considered lowbrow and unprofitable in a country bent on economic prosperity; they did not fit into the government’s elaborate national development plan; and the ethnic diversity of Singapore, its youthfulness as a nation, and its embedded colonial mentality left the country devoid of a cultural identity on which comics development depended for stories and characters.<sup>5</sup>

It was the initiative of a few enthusiastic cartoonists and fans that sparkplugged the promotion of comics, mainly between 1985 and 1994. Brothers Michael and Philip Cheah and Stephen Tan had been writing a comics column in the daily *Monitor*, and when the newspaper folded in 1985, they started a cyclostyled fanzine,

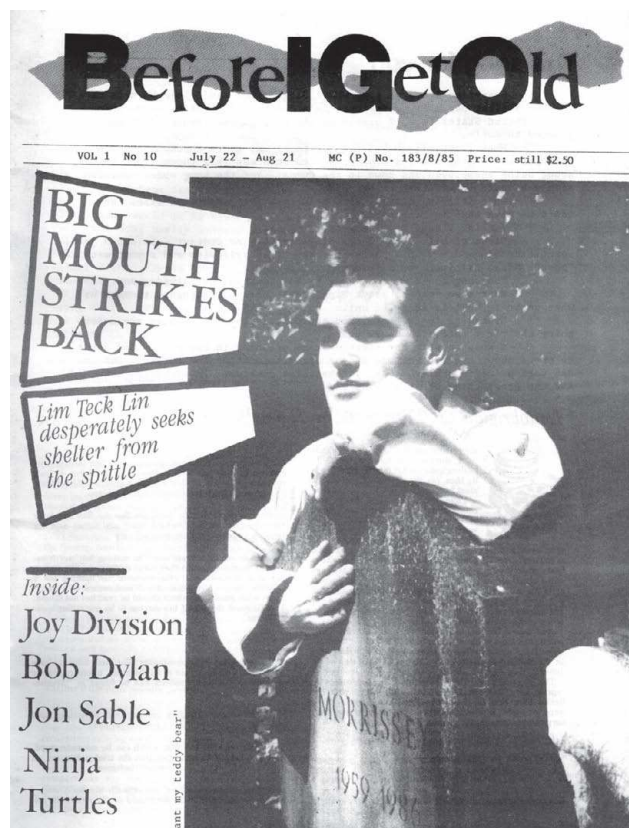


FIG. 11.6. An early, cyclostyled issue of *Big O* magazine (vol. 1, no. 10, 1985). Courtesy of Michael Cheah.

*Big O* (Before I Get Old), which became Singapore’s first popular culture magazine. Michael Cheah (1992) described *Big O*’s origins:

With that column, we built a team, a network, that we had when the newspaper died. When the *Monitor* closed, we were invited to be on radio to share our woes. A reader of the column called up and said, “Start your own magazine.” Over the air, I said, “It won’t happen,” but that night, my brother Philip and I talked and said, “Let’s do it.” I used my salary from my fulltime job to start *Big O*; every month, I put in at least [S]\$500. Actually, every month for five years, I put out \$500 to \$1,000 of my own money to sustain the magazine. The lesson is to start out with something you can sustain.

Starting from these modest beginnings, *Big O* evolved into a full-color, advertising-loaded chronicle of Singaporean music, film, and comics. The magazine encouraged comics development by reviewing U.S. and Chinese titles, arranging visits of foreign comics artists,





FIG. 11.7. *Conversations Up There* by Eric Khoo, serialized in *Big O* from issues 54 to 56. 1990. Courtesy of Michael Cheah.

and publishing the work of local cartoonists, sometimes as separate books. Among the latter were Eric Khoo and Johnny Lau, both in their twenties and destined to play key roles in Singapore's comic book history.

Khoo published his "The Origins of Condom Boy," "The Rebel Prince," and "Conversations Up There" in *Big O* and coauthored the six stories in *Bizarre Lust Stories from the Crypt*, brought out in 1989. He is credited with publishing Singapore's first graphic novel, *Unfortunate Lives*, nine bleak short stories drawn from headlines of the day that he finished in a mere three weeks, also in 1989. Khoo later became one of Singapore's early filmmakers (see C. T. Lim 1991a, 1989; N. Koh 1989). Khoo has often acknowledged that his freedom to create comics and films is a luxury facilitated by his family's immense wealth (C. T. Lim 1991a; also C. T. Lim 1991b).

Lau occasionally created *Big O* stories (e.g., "Rusty Thunder"), but his fame rested with the comics character Mr. Kiasu and the comic book and company (Comix Factory) that it spawned. Using the registry number of a company owned by his mother, Lau, along with James Suresh, Eric Chang, and Lim Yu Cheng, published the first issue of *Mr. Kiasu* in time for the 1990 Singapore Book Fair. A brash, obnoxious, and selfish bargain hunter, Mr. Kiasu was meant to make fun of Singaporeans' fear of losing out and their obsession with being number one.<sup>6</sup>

Published only yearly, *Mr. Kiasu* quickly became one of Singapore's most lucrative and controversial comic books. From the outset, Lau recognized that the art of cartooning had to be blended with a business sense, and he worked feverishly to merchandise the character. In 1993, Kiasu Enterprise was set up, marketing about



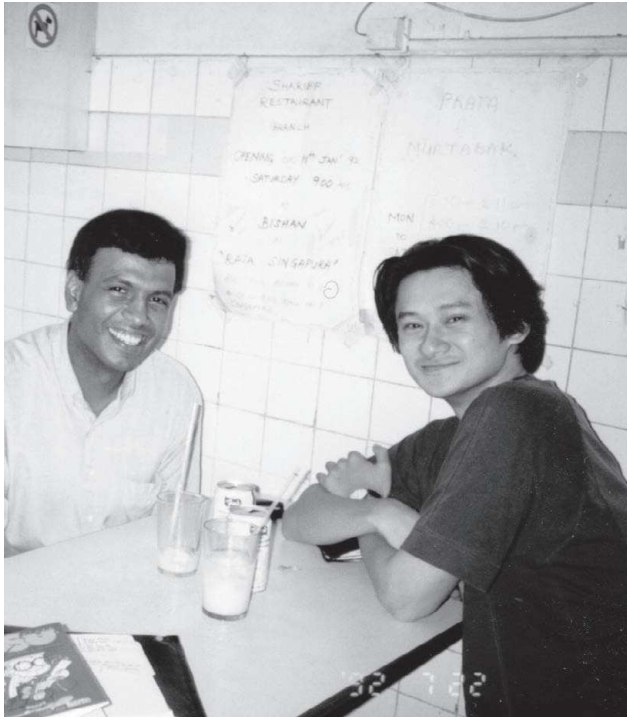


FIG. 11.8. Two of the founders of *Mr. Kiasu* comic books, James Suresh and Johnny Lau. Comix Factory, Singapore, July 22, 1993. Photo by John A. Lent.

twenty products and services including Kiasu mugs, bags, clothing, watches, a “13-inch ruler,” cereals, a “Kiasu Burger”<sup>7</sup> sold at McDonald’s restaurants, a “Kiasu Package” U.S. tour offered by a travel agency, a bargain stay at a hotel, and others. Lau and Comix Factory made use of all sorts of media; besides radio and newspaper advertisements, there were a weekly *Radio Kiasu* show of spoofs, a mini-CD called “Kiasumania,” an animation series, and a “semi-musical” stage play. Comix Factory sold reprint rights to publishers in Indonesia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong; domestically, Comix Factory also published the comic book *Singapore Shampoo*, based on hairstyling and bankrolled by a beauty shop owner; the Chinese-language humor digest *Song*; and the English-language *Mad* magazine–like *Kiasu Magazine* (Lau 1992; Lent 1996, 44).

In a market where the average comic book sold only one or two thousand copies, *Mr. Kiasu*’s sales ranged from twenty to forty thousand per issue. The books appeared each year in time for Singapore’s annual book fair and carried different titles (e.g., *Mr. Kiasu: Everything Also Must Grab* and *Mr. Kiasu: Everything Also Number One*). Lau (1992) attributed part of *Kiasu*’s success to its localness and to the group effort

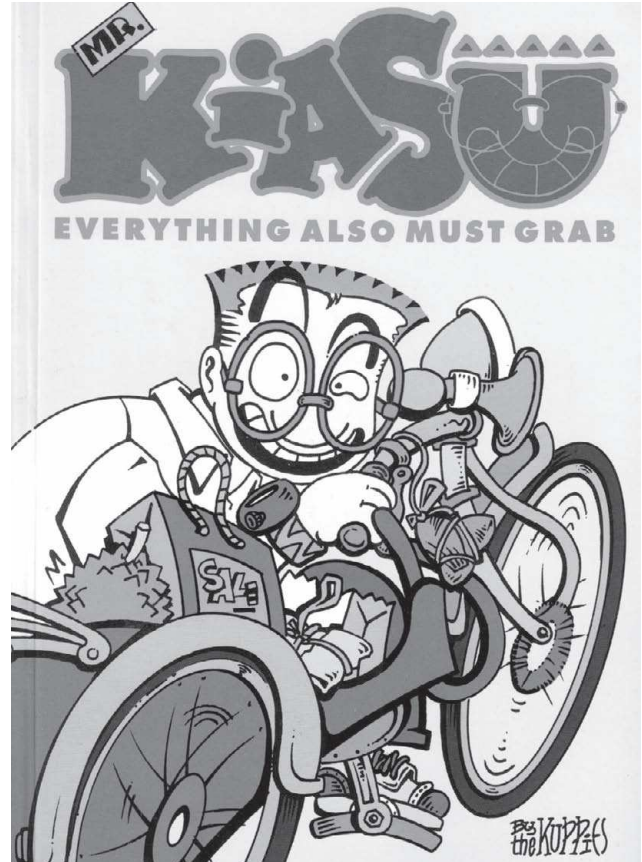


FIG. 11.9. The 1991 *Mr. Kiasu* comic book, *Mr. Kiasu: Everything Also Must Grab*, by Lim Yu Cheng, Johnny Lau, and James Suresh. Courtesy of Johnny Lau.

put in by the staff of Comix Factory, uncommon in Singapore’s cartooning community, where petty jealousy and lack of cohesiveness reign (Heng 1992; Lau 1992; Lou 1992).<sup>8</sup> Although the Comix Factory staff did not know “what [they] were getting into” when they conceptualized the first book (Suresh 1992), they created an enterprise that is the envy of the Singapore comics industry to this day.

Although, early on, a government agency solicited and obtained the help of the cartoon character in its courtesy campaign, authorities generally had difficulty accepting *Mr. Kiasu*. For example, in the courtesy campaign, *Mr. Kiasu*’s familiar figure could be shown, but no name could be attached because the word “kiasu” was seen as negative. On another occasion, a *Mr. Kiasu* CD was banned from government-owned television because of its use of slang English (Lau 1992). Similarly, culture critics were up in arms about *Mr. Kiasu* because of the negative implications of the term.

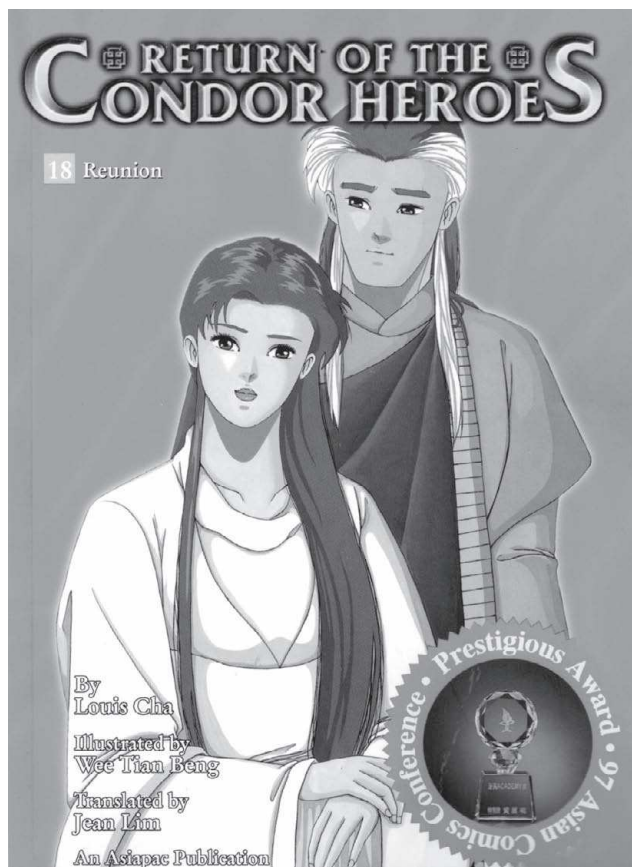


FIG. 11.10. *Return of the Condor Heroes*, vol. 18. Story by Louis Cha, illustrations by Wee Tian Beng. 1998.

The roles of *Big O* and *Mr. Kiasu* in promoting a comics culture in Singapore faded as the 1990s advanced. In 1994, *Big O* stopped printing comics because the magazine section devoted to them did not attract advertising. By the end of the decade, Johnny Lau also stopped writing *Mr. Kiasu*.

Other comic books and graphic novels came out in the late 1980s and 1990s, but with much less fanfare than *Mr. Kiasu* and for far shorter durations. In early 1991, female artist Egg Roll (Lee Lai Lai) published the semiautobiographical graphic novel *Passion* about her bittersweet experiences working for the Singaporean comics company Enoveltic Productions. Started by Peter Cheung, Enoveltic published a handful of comic books in the 1990s, notably *Shaolin Rabbits*, a takeoff on *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* with the difference that the creatures are Chinese rabbits who practice kung fu.

Also coming to prominence in the 1990s were the publisher Flame of the Forest and its line of expository—and sometimes sensationalist—comic books; Chuang Yi

Publishing, known for reproducing hundreds of Hong Kong and Taiwan editions of manga with licenses from Japanese publishers; and the prolific comics artist Wee Tian Beng, the first Singaporean to break into the Hong Kong and Taiwanese markets with his Astronotics series in 1993. Already in 1990, Wee created the manga-inspired graphic novel *Escapist Choice*, a local Chinese fantasy tale about chasing one's dreams, and later he was responsible for other best sellers such as *The Celestial Zone*, *Celestial 21*, *The Adventures of Wisely*, and *Return of the Condor Heroes*. The latter series, published by Asiapac Books, is an adaptation of a Hong Kong novel converted into a TV series and a few movies. Some of Wee's comics were products of his Singapore-based TCZ Studios, started in 2001 (Chong 2007). Another of Wee's works, *Dream Allegory*, which provided contrasting views of Singaporean society, was lauded by Lim Cheng Tju as one of three books that made 1992 the “best year for Singapore comics in terms of output.”

The other two, according to Lim, were Tan Wee Lian's *Ken's Song: Life after N.S.*, a somewhat anticapitalist story about a group of Singaporeans trying to find their “economic and moral footing”; and *The Shenton Street Gang: The Con Master* by the father-daughter team of Lu Peng and Lu Shufen, intended to teach readers how to become rich investing in stocks (Lim 2012a).

Despite these few works, comics companies in Singapore found themselves in a largely uninviting environment during much of the 1990s; the lack of public interest in and respect for comics led to instability among comics publishers and held back the industry. Newspaper cartoonist Heng Kim Song (1992) felt that comic book publishers did not last because they could not sell the two thousand copies of a given issue that would be required to make a profit. He said that most Singaporeans were not interested in comics, and those who were demanded very high-quality contents, drawing, and even paper stock, conditions Heng attributed to readers' relatively high level of education. Other commentators agreed, including the former comics editor of *Big O*, Lim Cheng Tju, who said that Singaporeans generally did not take comics seriously and certainly were

not interested in local ones. Lim (1992) figured the total potential comic book audience in Singapore in 1992 to be about ten thousand individuals, a generous estimate compared to the more usually cited fifteen hundred.

Such a tenuous market did not nurture a strong commitment from local cartoonists, 90 percent of whom drew comics on a part-time basis (Heng 1992); cartoonists routinely complained that they did not receive enough payment (Lau 1992), that their publishers did not support their work (Fong 1992), and that Singaporeans were too obsessed with making money as opposed to appreciating creativity (Ruiz 1992; S. A. Cheah 1992). Other hurdles Singaporean comics artists faced were overspecialization, whereby individuals not trained as cartoonists felt that they were incapable of entering the profession (Lou 1992); a colonial mentality that measured accomplishments by Western standards (Lou, 1992; Heng 1992); and the fear of failure. As Ken Lou (1992) said: "Everyone is afraid to fail; they want to be perfect, and if they can't be perfect, they don't try." Add to these reasons a shortage of publishing outlets and governmental and societal constraints, and artists quickly realized that creating comics was a risky venture.

### The Contemporary Scene

Many of the problems that plagued Singaporean comics for decades persist; however, in recent years, a number of factors have accounted for changes in both the profession and the industry. Among these are government encouragement and financial support for comics development; initial steps leading to the creation of an infrastructure for the comics community; efforts to further professionalize cartooning; and moves to strengthen the production and distribution of comic books and graphic novels.

The government's involvement in comics has followed from its Creative Industries Development Strategy (CIDS), meant to propel the creative arts in potentially profitable directions, a strategy that cartoonists have long recognized as lacking in the country. One

of the outcomes of the CIDS blueprint was the 2003 establishment of the Media Development Authority (MDA) under the Ministry of Information, Communications, and the Arts. The comic arts fall under the MDA.

At the least, MDA funding has helped establish the Association of Comic Artists (Singapore) (ACAS) and the First-Time Writers and Illustrators Publishing Initiative (F-TWIPI), both in 2005; IGNITE! (the Inaugural Graphic Novel Initiative) in 2009; and Epigram Books in 2011.

The ACAS fulfills both organizational and professional duties, responsible for bringing the disparate and often contentious comics community together for collaborative projects and training. The organization has two classrooms and an art studio in what it calls the CASTLE (the Comic Association's Studio for Teaching, Learning, and Execution). There, weekly classes are organized into tiers to satisfy all age groups, beginning with six-year-olds. The ACAS also conducts external courses and workshops for various high schools and universities.

The First-Time Writers and Illustrators Publishing Initiative is a collaborative project with Chuang Yi Publishing, designed to nurture talent through funding and training to create "world-class original intellectual property (IP) that carries strong commercial appeal" (H. T. Koh 2009). F-TWIPI originally provided grants to eight local comics creators to help defray the costs of first-time publication; Chuang Yi offered them mentorships. In its first four years, F-TWIPI has supported fifty-three new works by first-time authors.

In 2009, the MDA, working through F-TWIPI and the ACAS, launched IGNITE! to further develop Singaporean comic books and graphic novels. Under IGNITE!, new writer-illustrator teams were given S\$5,000 each to produce their maiden comics stories. The teams were given two months to create ten comic books of twenty-four pages each, later to be compiled into two anthologies. Another F-TWIPI project was Comics Publishing Forum 2007, which gathered established comics creators to share their artistic and commercial insights with aspiring cartoonists.



Originally a design company, Epigram Books branched out into publishing textual books and then graphic novels with funding from the MDA. The company's aim, according to owner Edmund Wee, is to publish Singaporean stories written and drawn by Singaporeans (C. T. Lim 2012b). Other government support has come from the National Arts Council, which has offered grants in the range of S\$20,000 per book to cartoonists, thus freeing them up to draw full-time for a few months.

Apart from government-sponsored initiatives, the comic arts in Singapore have made other professional advances. Cartoonists now have more opportunities to network, and show and sell their comics through Internet websites and blogs, small clubs, and festivals. Particularly useful among blogs is *singaporecomix*, maintained by history teacher and comics researcher Lim Cheng Tju, who occasionally includes interviews and news items. An example of a small comics club is Aspiring Mangaka and Writers Club, set up in 2008 by a writer with the pen name Moontique. In 2011, she coorganized Comics Xchange with the ACAS and Story Kitchen, an event that brought together comics and manga creators to share their experiences.

Comics festivals in Singapore have been rare until recent years, although the first such festival, the Singapore Comics Convention, was organized in 1986 by Robbie Poh and attracted four times the number of fans anticipated. Shortly afterward a second convention was held, chaired by Lee Yen Peen. Comics and graphic novels for years have also been launched at the annual Singapore Book Fair, and since 2008 at the Singapore Toy, Game, and Comic Convention (STGCC). Originally owned by the local event planner PI Events, STGCC was acquired by Reed Exhibitions in 2010. The three-day event is the largest comics gathering in Singapore, drawing nearly one hundred thousand visitors.

The production and distribution of comics saw significant changes in the 1990s and 2000s. Whereas before, only small publishers in Singapore brought out irregularly published comic books (no more than fifty local comic books total before 1999; Ho 1999), now an infrastructure is in place, summarized (with my

amendments) by Lim Li Kok (2004) of Asiapac. Lim said that Singapore comics publishing fell into four categories:

1. Independent publishers, set up by individual authors to publish their own works. The most successful of these have been Johnny Lau's Comix Factory and Wee Tian Beng's TCZ Studios. Others are the studios of Koh Hong Teng, Chub Tan, and Huang Xiao Wen.
2. Publishers who obtain reprint rights from various sources, but especially Japan and Hong Kong. Chuang Yi Publishing is the most prominent, starting out in 1990 as a distributor of Chinese-language manga. After initial success with *Slam Dunk* and *Dragon Ball*, Chuang Yi began importing titles from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea, and later secured licenses to distribute its comics to Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines, and India. As already indicated, the company also brings out local titles. Actually, Chuang Yi evolved from Walter Printing, which made a name for itself in the 1980s, issuing quality-printed pirated manga at a time when other such books were poorly produced. In 1995, because of government pressure, Chuang Yi began to publish only licensed Chinese editions of manga (Ng 2000, 47–48).

M. G. Creative, established in 1993, was started by comics artist Teo Seng Hock to bring out his works, as well as those of Japanese, Hong Kong, and some Singaporean authors. The studio was short lived. Publishers in this category often faced problems with licensing, such as fierce competition for a small market intensified by parallel importing, prohibitive costs of licensing foreign titles, and limited territory rights that restrict available markets and growth possibilities.

3. Publishers with their own publication programs and direction, focusing on producing original titles. To a certain degree, Chuang Yi is doing this, but the publisher that dominates this category is Asiapac Books, started in 1983 to issue cultural books, adding comics lines in 1988. The company has multiple book series in leadership, history, values for success, fantasies, philosophy, jokes/humor, hilarious, and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Asiapac comics, through selling foreign rights, have penetrated

the Asia-Pacific, European, and U.S. markets and have been translated into Indonesian, Thai, Korean, and other languages.

Epigram Books is a more recent entry to this category, publishing anthologies and graphic novels, such as those in 2012: Deng Coy Miel's *SceneGapore: A Cartoon Walkabout*; Koh Hong Teng and Oh Yong Hwee's *Ten Sticks and One Rice*; and Andrew Tan's (Drewscape) *Monsters, Miracles and Mayonnaise*.

#### 4. Internet Publishers.

Comics books in Singapore reach fans mainly through comics retail stores, comics rental shops, and mainstream book chains. The comics retail stores survive primarily by selling items other than comic books such as games, clothing, figurines, and the like. A major product category in many comics stores in 2000 was Pokemon paraphernalia. Lim Cheng Tju (2000) said: "Most shops don't order new comics releases; they just use up old inventories and concentrate on games, toys, cards. Only one or two shops have regular new shipments weekly." English-language comic book shops at times have had a precarious existence, especially after falling off from their heyday in the 1980s, when comic book collecting was profitable and Singaporeans viewed rare issues as sound investments. Soon, however, shop owners faced stiff competition, and many vendors were selling the same books in a limited market. In 1988–1989, some shops saw their sales drop from one-third to one-half, resulting in steep price undercutting. Simultaneously, rising freight and operating costs and unsold inventories plagued shop owners; they had to pay their U.S. distributors three months in advance without having a clue whether the books would sell in Singapore. Moreover, Marvel and DC, the two major U.S. suppliers, do not take returns; thus, to manage overstock, some shops reexported U.S. comics to Malaysia. Sales also suffered because shop owners, some of whom were comics fans-turned-entrepreneurs, lacked business acumen; and to top it off, the government often conducted raids on outlets suspected of selling pornographic books. (For more on comics stores, see Ming 1989,

28–30; Tan 1991.) The Chinese-language comics shops have done better.

Comic Connection, with twenty-five strategically-placed outlets, is Singapore's largest retail comics chain overall. Established in 1992, the firm handles mostly manga translated into Chinese as well as Hong Kong comics, issued in weekly and book formats. The weeklies arrive as soon as they are published, while the books, although more economical, appear when two to four issues of a weekly are compiled. Unlike in Malaysia, where there are enough readers to warrant purchasing licenses from publishers in Taiwan and Hong Kong to reprint locally, in Singapore the weeklies and books must be imported. Comic Connection encourages customers to become members at S\$10, for which they are given discounts; much of the company's income comes from merchandise sales (Foo 2011). Chinese-language comics stores are mostly in the suburbs, following an urban planning push in the mid-2000s to move some businesses out of the busy Orchard Road area in the city. Some of the stores also offer very affordable book rentals, either to read on the premises or take home.

Rental shops have a long tradition in Singapore, as in much of Asia. Three major distributors—Jin Long, Zheng Tian-liang, and Zhang Brothers—supply the rental shops. In the 1990s, comics cafés and comics libraries offered an alternative to fans wanting a comfortable place to while away time reading comics. The first comics café, simply named Comic Cafe, opened in 1998 with an inventory of more than fifteen thousand titles, mostly Chinese editions of manga, some Chinese and English works, and early pirated comics issued by Chuang Yi (Ng 2000, 50). One newspaper critic glowed about the comforts offered by such cafés: "At the Comic Cafe . . . readers leave their shoes at the front door and enter a tranquil Japanese-style reading room complete with low tables and straw-woven *tatami* mats. And at com.net centre . . . patrons can read comics and surf the Net on one of its five Internet terminals—a two-in-one reading and surfing concept" (Teo 1999). The first comics library, Archive, opened in 1999, with thirty thousand (mostly Japanese) titles.

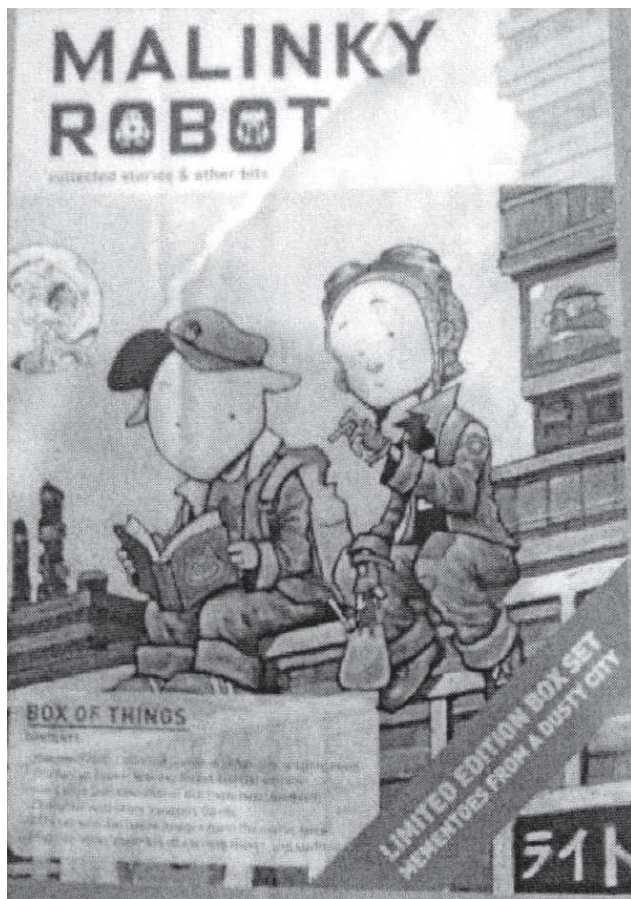


FIG. 11.11. *Malinky Robot: Collected Stories and Other Bits* by Sonny Liew.

Comics corners in mainstream bookstores were introduced in the late 1990s, the first ones located in outlets of Popular Bookshop, then the largest bookstore chain in Singapore, and Commercial Press Bookstore, the major Chinese-language shop. When the megabookstore Kinokuniya opened in 1999, it was stocked with six thousand Japanese, Chinese, and English comics titles. A second major Japanese book dealer in Singapore, Maruzen, also has a large inventory of comics (see n. 5).

As indicated, all of these outlets are stocked predominantly with foreign titles, although, with government assistance through the MDA and its appendages as described above, local comic books and graphic novels find shelf space more frequently.

A whole generation of new comics artists active since the mid-2000s are sustaining Singaporean comics, although only a very few make their living doing so; most supplement their meager earnings by doing freelance commercial jobs, drawing outsourced stories for U.S. comics companies, or working outside Singapore.

Troy Chin, Sonny Liew, Koh Hong Teng, and the abovementioned Wee Tian Beng, who are among Singapore's most successful present-day comics creators, are exemplars of the variety of ways cartoonists make their living. Chin perhaps comes closest to being full-time, surviving on sales of his books and personal savings. Two of his recent graphic novels are *Loti*, a manga-style, four-volume account of a primary school boy and his search for a unique dog named Loti, and *Resident Tourist*, an autobiographical graphic novel about Chin's attempt to "find himself" after a stay in New York City.

Sonny Liew, born in Malaysia and a Singapore permanent resident, earns a living working for Marvel and independent publishers in the United States as well as drawing freelance illustrations and exhibition paintings. Among his local efforts are the *New Paper* strip *Frankie and Poo*, which launched his career while he was in England studying philosophy in the 1990s, and *Malinky Robot: Collected Stories and Other Bits*, a Xeric Award winner about Japanese day laborers eking out a living on construction sites. Liew's comics stories are light, humorous, and sentimental. He has had a hand in promoting Singaporean comics by helping launch the ACAS and Epigram Books and, with Lim Cheng Tju, compiling *Liquid City*, two volumes (2008 and 2011) of graphic novellas and illustrated essays by Southeast Asian comics artists and writers.

Koh Hong Teng works full-time on comics, painting, and freelance commercial work. He illustrated the graphic novel *01321* (1996, self-published) and published *Gone Case* in two volumes (2010 and 2011) with writer Dave Chua. A couple of Singaporeans working in the United States are FSc (Foo Swee Chin) and Hu Jingxuan, among the country's few female cartoonists. FSc draws for Neko Press and Slave Labor Graphics, and does her own works such as the reverse alphabet book *Zeet* and the recent webcomic *Clairvoyance* (Acosta 2011, 183-86). Hu also uses manga style, mostly in short stories and illustrations for mainstream Chinese comics magazines. Both FSc's and Hu's comics explore the artists' "inner selves and psyches, and [they] use their work as an emotional outlet" (Acosta 2011, 189). In some cases,



cartoonists add to their incomes by serving as creative directors at Singaporean publishing houses.

Summing up, the growth of Singaporean comics has been significant in recent years, moving beyond the wishful thinking stage to one that has paid artists rich dividends professionally, even though financial returns are still marginal. The crowning achievement has been the growing awareness that Singapore has its own comics culture and is not just a haven for imports from Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States. For the time being, that may be enough.

#### Notes

1. The connection between woodcuts and cartoons was evident in post-World War II Singapore as well. In 1953, the book *Selection of Woodcuts and Cartoons by Singapore and Malayan Artists* was published, described by Lim (2007b, 250) as the “first post-World War Two cartoon collection about the immediate experience of local living, focusing on issues of morality, values, Chinese education, and hardships under the British colonial society.” Woodcuts for the book were selected by Ho Kah Leong and cartoons by Ong Shih Cheng (Ong Yih), friends studying at Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts.

2. Although the content of postwar cartoons in Singapore became more insular, the form and approach were still very much influenced by China and Mao Zedong and reflected leftist attitudes.

3. Lee Chee Chew (1992) said that his *Life's Like That* strip was “forced” on him when the *Straits Times* decided to emphasize local strips: “The *Straits Times* was being revamped to be like the Chinese dailies with local strips. The editor told me to come up with a strip. It's a freebie. I'm not paid individually for *Life's Like That*; it comes with the package.” Lee's weekly workload included drawing one *Life's Like That* strip and three to four illustrations for the feature section, as well as designing and illustrating two covers for that section. He also drew a spot cartoon, *Sun Strokes*, every two weeks. He described *Life's Like That* as “noncontroversial [and] diplomatic” in theme and approach.

4. Normally, *Chit and Chat* occupied *Punch Lines*' space on alternate days, so one or the other of these cartoons appeared daily.

5. To get a sense of comics availability in Singapore's large bookstores, I visited Popular Books and Kinokuniya Bookstore (Takashimaya Shopping Centre) on July 18, 2000. Popular carried scores of titles, dominated by Taiwanese Tsai Chih-chung's philosophical series (e.g., *Sayings of Buddha*, *The Illustrated Dharma*, *Journey to the West*, and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*). The best-represented Singaporean was Wee Tian Beng, with his *The Celestial Zone* and *Return of the Condor Heroes* series, the latter with eighteen titles. Hong Kong's Ni

Kuang was represented with *The Old Cat*, *Hide and Seek*, *The Return of the Hermi*, and *The Sunken Ship*. Other titles included *The 8 Immortals* and *The Legend of Zhong Kui*, joint efforts by Singaporean Jiang Wei and Malaysian Chan Kok Sing, and *The Legend of Justice Bao* by Ng Siow Boon. At Kinokuniya, there was an entire section devoted to comics, populated by scores of browsers. Large U.S. mainstream and Japanese manga collections dominated, with smaller sections on cartoon books like those of Bill Watterson's *Calvin and Hobbes* and Chinese-language titles from Hong Kong and Taiwan. When I asked for Singaporean comic books, I was met with blank stares or redirected to three or four other parts of the store. The only local comic or cartoon book to be found was Morgan Chua's just-released *My Singapore*.

6. Jesse Wong (1995, 1) identified “kiasus” as “the buffet patrons who pile more food onto their plates than they can possibly eat. But kiasuism is more than just plain greed. Increasingly, the label is used to mean people who go to absurd lengths to get ahead or to preserve some petty advantage.” Generally, *kiasu*, a Hokkien word adopted by Singaporean English (“Singlish”), refers to the selfish, grasping, petty behavior that Singaporeans, in a joking manner, sometimes attribute to themselves as a sort of national characteristic.

7. A kiasu burger was a chicken sandwich appropriately loaded with extra lettuce, extra sauce, extra-long buns, and “47 sesame seeds.” A two-month-long campaign resulted in sales of 1.2 million kiasu burgers (Lent 1996: 44).

8. The cohesiveness did not endure, as each of the partners went his own way and publishing activities were suspended.

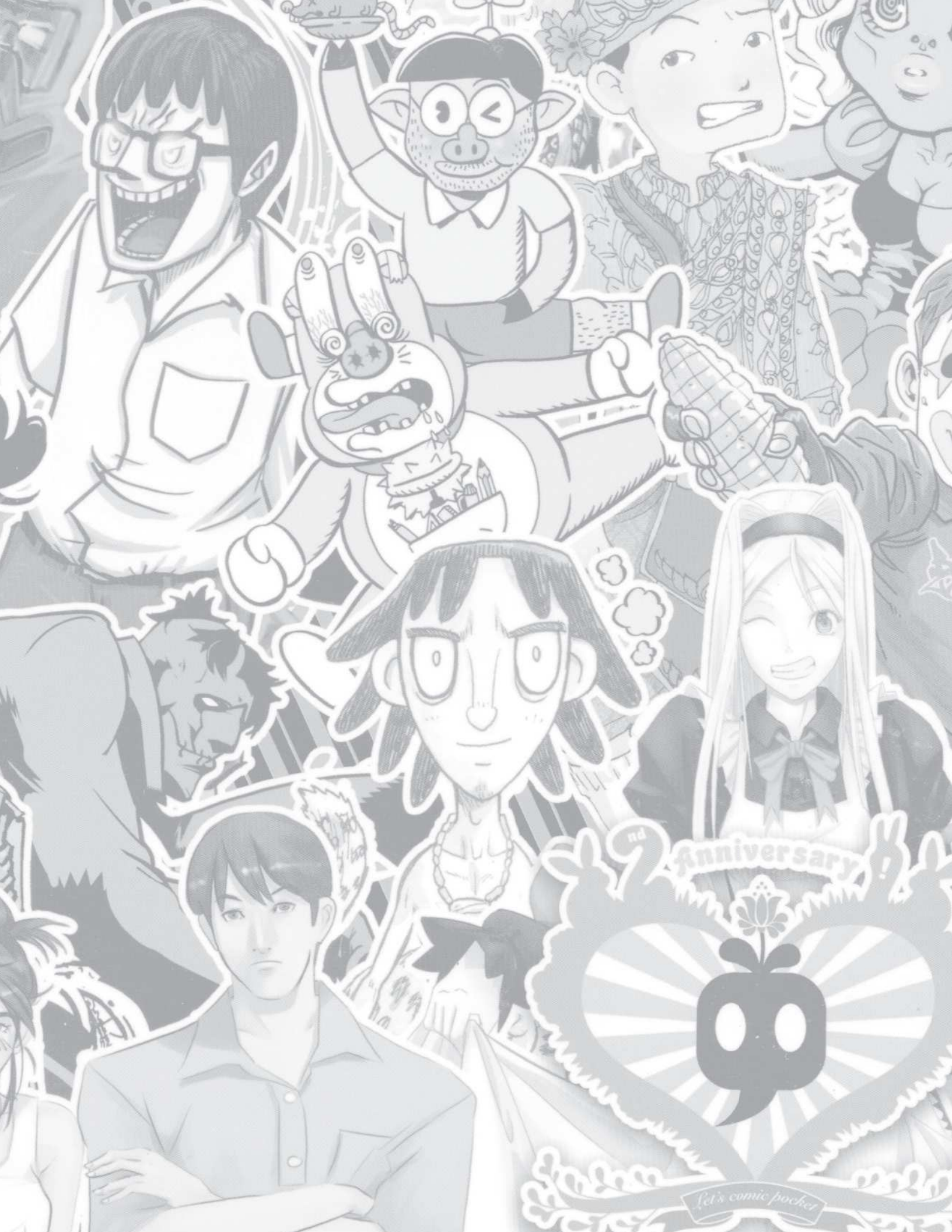
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2<sup>nd</sup> Anniversary



let's comic pocket

Thai cartoons and comics have exhibited some unusual quirks during their century of existence. First of all, one of the earliest “cartoonists” was H. M. King Rama VI (ruled 1910–1925), who not only designated the Thai phrase *phap lo* (parodic image) to signify cartoons (Chulasak 1999, 6) but also drew satirical caricatures (to embarrass corrupt officials) in the royal newspapers *Dusit Samit*, *Dusit Samai*, and *Dusit Sakkee*. He made sure that readers could easily identify his subjects, for example by drawing the director of royal railroads astride a locomotive (Warat 2014; Sitthiporn and Chanansiri 2000). By 1920, the king had also sponsored two drawing competitions (including *phap lo*) involving state officials.

Also different have been newspaper verse editorials associated with the country’s premier cartoonist, Prayoon Chanyawongse, during the latter part of the twentieth century. The verse editorial (or illustrated column) is a montage of drawings within one large panel, which advocates or instructs in verse about agriculture and other modes of self-employment. They differ from conventional cartoons because of their poetic element, their mixture of numerous drawings within one frame, and their sometimes risqué nature. Closely resembling the verse editorials (minus the poetry) are summary cartoons, usually found in Sunday newspapers as “batch[es] of drawings within one panel on a theme in the news” (Chai 1993; also Muen 1993).

Comic books also have taken twists of their own, with some issues appearing in two sizes—the more conventional letter size and the pocket-size version useful to commuters stuck in traffic. Also, the distinctive one-baht (now five- to ten-baht) comics are designed to satisfy the interests and budgets of lower-class Thais.

As far as historians have determined, the earliest Thai cartoon appeared in *Samran Witthaya* (Enjoyable knowledge) magazine in January 1907. It revolved around a riddle in the form of a poem. On the right of a Chinese pork seller sitting on a chair appeared the words: “What is it? Two-legged sitting on three-legged. Four legged comes and snatches one leg away. Two-legged is angry, wielding three-legged. Throwing away four-legged, getting one leg back. What is it?”<sup>1</sup> Thailand’s

## Chapter 12

# Thailand



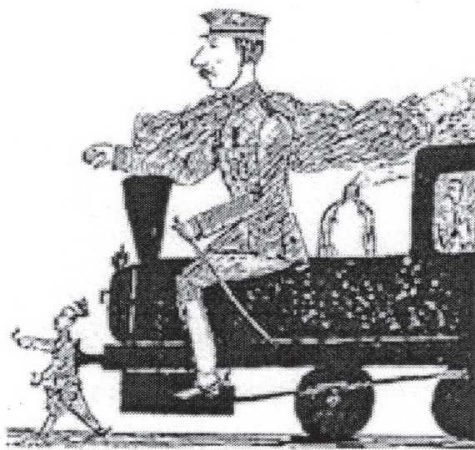


FIG. 12.1. A *phap lo* (parodic image) drawn by H. M. King Rama VI (1910–1925), depicting the head of royal railroads.

first published political cartoon appeared in a 1923 edition of the *Krungthep Daily Mail*, drawn by European-educated Pleng Tri-Pin, the winner of a royally endorsed competition (see Karnjariya 2000). Pleng made cartoon production more expedient by introducing metal block printing, which he had learned while abroad. He was

followed by a string of political cartoonists in the 1930s, including Than Utthakanon (pen name<sup>2</sup> Thanya) and Chalerm Wuttikosit (Chalermwut).

Comic strips were first serialized in daily newspapers in the 1930s; later, they were compiled in comic books. The pioneer of the long-story strip was Sawas Jutharop with *Sang Thong* (The golden conch) and *Krai Thong*. *Sang Thong*, like strips that followed, recounted a fable, in this case about a boy who lives in a conch. It was published in the newspaper *Thai Rath* from 1932 to 1933. In the many other series he subsequently created, Sawas used a stock character, the Popeye-like Khun Muen (Sitthiporn and Chanansiri 2000). Others who serialized strips were Fuen Rod-Ari (Dej na Bang Klo); Jammong Rod-Ari, creator of the fable-based *Raden Landai* and *Prayanoi Chom Talat*; Chant Suwanaboon, pioneer of children's comics with his *Pong &*



FIG. 12.2. An example of a summary cartoon by Yoot (Yoottachai Kaewdee). 1993. Courtesy of Yoot.



*Priao*; Witt Sutthasatien (Wittamin); and Hem Vejakorn (Kru Hem), remembered primarily as a teacher of later generations of cartoonists (Saran 2000; see also Pairote and Kullasap 1980, 21; Lent 1997, 94; Chulasak 1998a; Chulasak 1998b, 5; Sitthiporn and Chanansiri 2000). Also predating World War II was Prayoon Chanya-wongse, who excelled in nearly every branch of comic art, including serialized cartoons; in fact, his best-known work was a serialized cartoon version of a lively folktale, *Chanta Korope*.

The comic book as a separate entity came into existence during Thailand's golden age of cartooning, 1953 to 1962, when publishers such as Bankok, Banlue Sarn, Padung Suksa, and Pramuansarn brought out the first titles. They spawned a generation of comic book creators who are still well known and influential in the twenty-first century. Among them are Adirek Ariyamontri and his popular Disney-like *Nu Lek Lung Krong* (Little baby and Uncle Krong); Weerakul Thongnoi (Por Bangplee), creator of *Asawin Sai Fa* (The thunder knight), about a disabled boy-turned-superhero; Pimon Kalasee, who, in 1952, started Thailand's first children's comic book, *Tukkata*, using his and his daughter's nickname for its title; Mongkol Wong-Udom (Mongkol), who also drew children's comics; and Sa-Ngob Jampat (Jaew Waew), whose main character, Siptri Jam (Lance Corporal Jam), came to represent the Thai police (Warat 2014; Chulasak 1997, 1998a).

Early on, after the war, foreign comic books came to Thailand by way of global merchants and Thai soldiers who had fought with the Allies. Some soldiers translated and reprinted Western comics. After *Weeratham* (Courageous righteousness) came out in 1957 as a comic book compilation of *Flash Gordon* and *Tintin* strips, Thai artists turned from traditional fables to superheroes. Titles included *Jom Apinihan* (Master of marvel) by Lang Chak; *Jao Chai Phom Thong* (The blond prince) by Chulasak Amornweij; *Singh Dam* (Black lion) by Niwat Tarapan; and the abovementioned *Asawin Sai Fa*. In most cases, the stories and characters used Western models mixed with traditional Thai motifs such as magic (Warat 2014; Sitthiporn and Chanansiri 2000).

Of the early comics publishers, one stands out because of its local content, steady profits, and endurance—Banlue Sarn, which evolved from other ventures of founder Banlue Utsahajit. Originally in the “junk business,” Banlue started Banlue Sarn in 1953, initially to sell used books and magazines. The comics publishing began when Banlue met with an artist and decided that this was a good field in which to invest. Initially, the publisher retained one or two artists and contracted with an outside printer. The first comic books were non-serialized, adventure short stories, “the ideas and themes more or less the same as in the West” (Vithit 1993). *Sing Shirt Dam* (Black shirt hero) ushered in Banlue Sarn's indigenous publishing; it successfully sold at one baht per copy.

To compete with *Tukkata*, Banlue Sarn in 1957 started its own children's comic book, *Nuja* (Little children), drawn by Jamnoon Leksomtis (Jum Jim). Two years later, the comic book *Baby*, under the direction of artist Wattana Petchuwan (Ar-Wat, or Uncle Wat), appeared. *Nuja* and *Baby* still survive as Thailand's longest-running comic books.

Banlue Sarn branched out into other types of weekly and biweekly periodicals in the early 1960s, “one women's magazine after another,” according to the owner's son Vithit Utsahajit (1993). The firm became Thailand's major publisher of songbooks (80 to 90 percent of which were Thai folk music) and issued numerous humor books (not in comics format) by the famous author P. Preecha Intrapolit. The latter, in serial format and based on current events, spurred sales for Banlue Sarn. The company then published a movie star magazine, followed by *Srisiam Weekly*, with fictional works and serials, and later *Kwanruen*, a women's and home magazine. From the early 1970s to the 1980s, a film studio was also part of the company complex, producing ten feature-length movies during that time, and after 1982 a recording studio was added. Vithit Utsahajit, who had become the firm's managing director and comics editor, said that Banlue Sarn's movies were very successful but that filmmaking itself was a problem-plagued endeavor. “With comics and magazines, once the business is established,



FIG. 12.3. Vithit Utsahajit, director of Banlue Sarn. Bangkok, August 3, 1993. Photo by John A. Lent.

you just move on,” he said, “but with film, one has to begin over and over” (Vithit 1993).<sup>3</sup>

Banlue Utsahajit, who was still active in the company in the 1990s, steadfastly maintained a policy that his comics, magazines, and films not deal with religion, politics, or pornography. Instead, humor had to be the focus. Vithit Utsahajit gave the rationale for not delving into other comics genres:

First of all, we have lots of humor material. Second, these types of comics are very easy to read and understand. They have universal appeal. My brothers, sister, and I found that out while studying in Japan and the U.S. We would translate these books for fellow students and they would laugh their heads off. Third, our marketing people tell us it is not worth doing comics in other genres as these are very limited markets. If we did, we would have to do high quality; those companies doing other genres now are bringing out low-quality work. Also, the range for humor among our customers is very big so there is no room for other genres. From the highest-ranking government official or top businessman, to children who have just learned to read—all are readers of comics. Advertising people and those in entertainment take ideas from our books. (Vithit 1993)

Some of Banlue Sarn’s titles are merely one gag after another in cartoon, joke, or written story form.

Once Vithit Utsahajit left filmmaking, he devoted his full attention to the family’s publishing ventures. In 1973,



FIG. 12.4. *Khai Huaro* (Selling laughter). Courtesy of Vichit Utsahajit.

he started up the publication *Khai Huaro* (Selling laughter), different in that it did not concentrate solely on one artist’s works as was customary but instead used mostly one- and three-frame gag cartoons drawn by several cartoonists. Two years later, Vithit published *Maha Sanuk* (Super Fun), short, illustrated series by many of *Khai Huaro*’s artists. Many of the series became comic books themselves, such as *Ai Tua Lek* (Little one), created in 1992 and drawn by Pakdee Santaweek (Tai); *Sao Dok Mai kap Nai Kluay Khai* (The flower girl and the banana boy) by Fane; and *Nu Hin Inter* (Little Hin Goes International) by Oah.

Vithit Utsahajit made his comics unique in 1986, bringing the books out in conventional as well as pocket-size formats. Children prefer the pocket-size comics, and they are favorites of Bangkok drivers, who can handle them easily while spending a great deal of time stuck in traffic gridlock. Of all the Banlue Sarn titles, the pocket comics are the best sellers (Kanokporn 1993; Nipa 1993). Although Vithit would not provide a weekly circulation figure for the biggest seller, *Khai*

*Huaro*, he did say that it was in the hundreds of thousands (Vithit 1993). Other sources show weekly sales, in the year 2000, at two hundred thousand copies (Sitthiporn and Chanansiri 2000).

Banlue Sarn's strategy in the 1990s was to have a new issue of one of its monthly periodicals on the market at least every five days. The other comic books at that time were *Baby*, *Nuja*, *Ai Tua Lek*, *Mitti Pisawong* (mystery and science fiction), *Konulawang* (Mess up), *Yonson* (Reversed arrow), *Phian* (Fanatic), *Bakhropsut* (Completely mad), and *Parade*. Two other magazines were *Lap Samong* (Brain games) and *Suandek* (Children's garden).

*Khai Huaro*, which has remained the anchor of Banlue Sarn's publishing program, is popular with adults and children, while *Maha Sanuk* appeals mostly to children. The success of *Khai Huaro* spurred Vithit to seek overseas distribution with Chinese, Indonesian, and Japanese editions; it also sparked imitators, such as *Sue Huaro* (Buying laughter) and *Fa Huaro* (Laughing sky).

Banlue Sarn is the publishing arm of Srisiam Print and Pack, whose other entities are a graphic design company, an import-export branch handling merchandising and direct mailing, and a 3-D animation studio. The latter turned the comic book *Ai Tua Lek* into *Pang Pond: The Animation*.

In 1993, thirty artists (equally split between full-time and part-time) worked as a team with management and other staff to create story ideas. Vithit related the procedure:

The whole staff, including me, has a weekly meeting where we discuss what to do—the story, the events. Michael Jackson is coming to Thailand, so we make a joke about that. *Jurassic Park* is very popular now so all of us will play around with that as a theme. We come up with ideas, and after we *all* come up with themes, the artists draw them. Some of the ideas are from readers who send them to us—short stories and jokes. We give the readers a little reward for their ideas—a radio, or TV, or money, if we accept their ideas. (Vithit 1993)

Artists earned a monthly salary as well as extra pay for each specific work they did and a yearly bonus. Vithit said that the artists were well off financially and that “the stars get more than the editor.” Very well-known cartoonists earned 50,000–70,000 baht monthly, excluding the annual bonus; by comparison, a new employee in a government office at that time (1993) received 5,000 baht monthly. The cartoonists' salaries, as well as production costs (especially the cost of paper), were the biggest drains on Banlue Sarn's budget. Also costly and time consuming was the training of artists, which averaged about 100,000–150,000 baht per cartoonist.

Once artists were accepted by Banlue Sarn, they were apprenticed for a one- or two-year period, during which they were given on-the-job opportunities to improve their quality through various levels of work and to consult with other artists and the editor. Vithit said: “We give them a period of one to two years before their first works are published, but it depends; those who learn fast, we publish after a half year” (Vithit 1993).

Distribution, one of the major problems of the comics industry, was handled in-house by Banlue Sarn. Sixty-two Bangkok dealers and vendors appeared at the company's distribution center on a regular basis, where they purchased the comic books at a 25 percent discount, paying seven and a half baht for ten-baht books and five and a quarter baht for seven-baht books. In each of Thailand's then seventy-two provinces, an agent acted on behalf of the company, selling the comic books to provincial shops and bookstores. An agent was given a 30 percent discount and was free to determine discounting for clients. Bangkok dealers/vendors were expected to pay cash for the comics, while provincial agents were given two months' credit (Kanokporn 1993).

Although dominant, Banlue Sarn has not stood alone in the comic book industry. Vithit (1993) said that six or seven small comics companies existed in the early 1990s, producing about ten titles. He dismissed them as insignificant competitors, saying that the gap between them and Banlue Sarn was so huge that “we don't even look.” He added: “They are small businesses and we don't see them as our competitors. We are really competing with



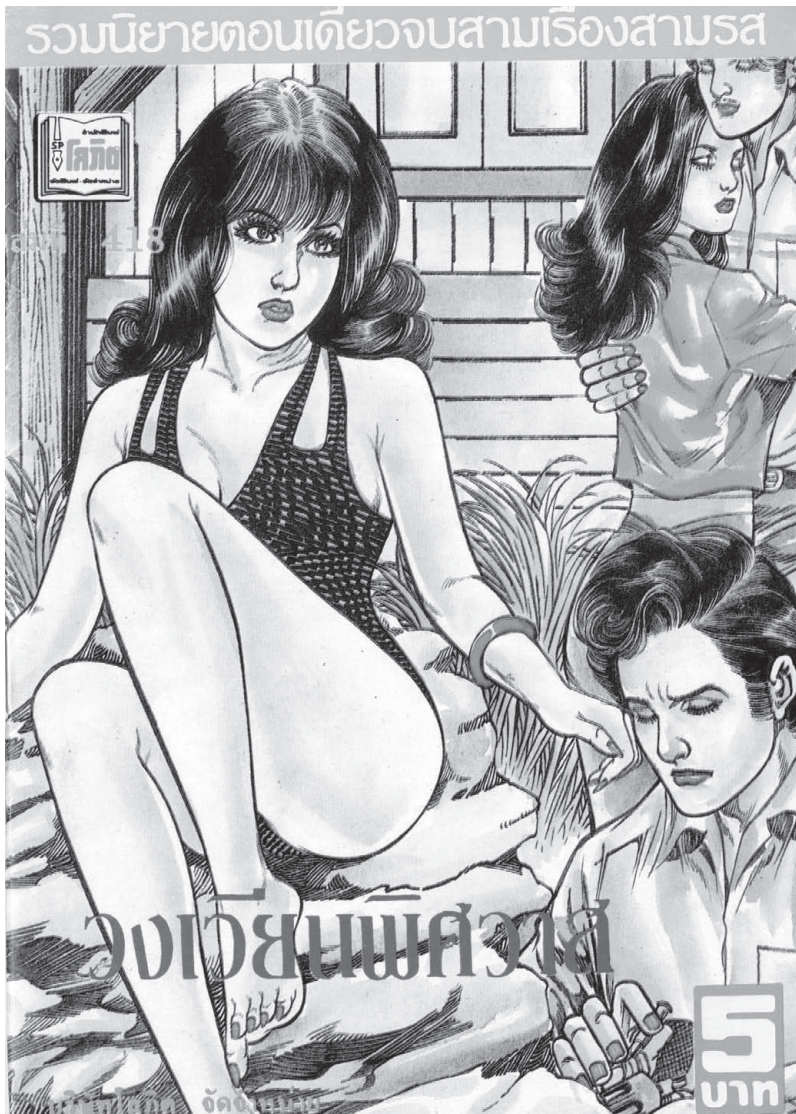


FIG. 12.5. A five-baht (formerly one-baht) comic book.

ourselves.” According to Vithit about 80 percent of the other comics publishers were also bringing out humor comics; some issued one-baht comics.

Among comics publishers operating from the 1970s through the 1990s were Thai Wattanapanich, the Benjarong Group, Sakol Publishing, Bangkok Sarn, the Nation Publishing Group, Post Publishing, New Venture Generation Publishing, the Vibulkij Publishing Group, and Siam Inter-Comic. Thai Wattanapanich was a textbook company when it launched the children’s comics magazine *Chaiyapruet Cartoon* in 1971, with popular characters such as Tarzan and his monkey, “Joon.” *Chaiyapruet Cartoon* survived until the late 1990s. The Benjarong (“five colors”) Group was started in 1981 by five cartoonists—Triam Chachumporn, Ohm Rajawej,

Somchai Panpracha, Surapol Pittayasakul, and Chalerm Akapu—who, that year, established *Phuean Cartoon* (Friends of cartoon), a short-lived monthly children’s comic. The Benjarong Group still exists. Triam Chachumporn became a very prolific artist, drawing for *Chaiyapruet Cartoon*, one-baht comics, government textbooks, and graphic novels. In 1981, his *Jon’s Recollection* was awarded the Prime Minister’s Award for Best Graphic Novel (Warat 2014).

Sakol Publishing and Bangkok Sarn are publishers of *cartoon lem la baht* (one-baht cartoons, a baht equaling approximately three U.S. cents), which made their debut in the 1970s. With story lines originally based on values and morals, the one-baht comics attracted both adult and child readers and were the nesting place for

prominent cartoonists such as Chaichol Chewin, Rung Chaokao, Nukrob Rungkaew, and Maewmeow. At their peak, one-baht comics topped one million in circulation, kept almost a hundred artists busy, and nurtured ten publishers. Bangkok Sarn surpassed Sakol (the first one-baht publisher) and others when it increased the number of pages per issue from sixteen to twenty-four, and for a brief time in 1978–1979 to thirty-two (Warat 2014).

One-baht comics changed to more salacious, formulaic content (stories about princes and princesses, sex and ghosts) after the 1982 economic crisis when wages were reduced, forcing veteran cartoonists to leave. Amateurs took their place, resulting in lower quality. As Warat Karuchit (2014) wrote: “Some cartoonists started drawing without having a plot, which usually led to a situation in which, in order to end the story, the artists would just write the description on the whole final page instead of drawing the pictures. Copying other artists’ work also became an issue. All of these negative factors led to growing criticism and the dismay of Thai readers toward one-baht cartoon.”

The Nation Multimedia Group, Post Publishing, and New Venture Generation were mostly involved in reprinting comic books from the United States and Japan. In 1992, Nation began printing and distributing Disney comics on a revolving weekly basis. The balloons in these comics used the Thai language; however, at the bottom of each panel, English dialogue was provided (Blaufarb 1992, 84). The Nation started out with four Disney titles, and the number tripled within a year (*Asian Mass Communication Bulletin* 1993, 6).

Under similar circumstances, Post Publishing in 1993 brought out eleven comic books under separate licensing agreements with Warner, Turner Broadcasting/Hanna-Barbera, and United Media Licensing. Characters such as Bugs Bunny, Garfield, the Flintstones, and others were featured in dual-language comic books distributed nationwide through newsstands, leading retailers, subscription, and the school network (*Asian Mass Communication Bulletin* 1993, 6).

Both the Nation Group and Post, as well as New Venture Generation, Vibulkij, and Siam Inter-Comic,

were also heavily involved in publishing Japanese manga. New Venture Generation started out in July 1992 as part of the Books for Children Project of Manager Children’s Publishing, which itself was a subsidiary of the Manager Media Group. The group was started by Sondhi Limthongkul, a wealthy man until the 1990s economic crash diminished his resources; at one time, he was closely allied with former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, but later denounced him. New Venture Generation produced parenting books obtained from U.S. copyright holders before publishing manga.

Vibulkij published a number of manga books beginning in the early 1990s such as *Mr. Monthly*, *Sirus*, *Young Friday Mag*, and *KC Weekly*. In 1992, Vibulkij launched *Thai Comics*, which showcased young Thai artists, among them Eakasit Thairat (creator of *Death*, 1994), Chumnarn Julajaturasilarut (*Money: Heal the World Adventure*, 1999), Somran Jarukulvanit (*Fire*, 1995), Mangkorn Sarapol (*Killer*, 1999), and Rattana Sathit (*Miti Tawan*, 1999). The style of some of these titles showed a Japanese influence.

Siam Inter-Comic, begun in 1990 by Rawi Lohthong, was originally a subcontractor producing comics for Siam Sport Printing, which published sports newspapers and magazines as well as general magazines. After Vibulkij, Siam Inter-Comic became the second-largest copyright owner of manga.

Manga made a big breakthrough in Thailand in the 1990s as Thai-style comics faded because of overrepetition of some themes (e.g., simple gags, royalty); low pay that prevented the industry from attracting and retaining talented artists; a lack of investors, who stayed away because they believed that comics had only limited long-term prospects; the diversion of readers’ interests to other pastimes; and the low value Thais attached to comics (Sirimas 1993, B-1).

Japanese comics offered an alternative with their sophisticated plots, impressive artwork, and realistic stories. Before the passing of a copyright bill in Thailand in 1995, they were less expensive as well, as some Thai publishers and distributors had been violating copyright regulations. About twenty manga publishers, including





FIG. 12.6. Second anniversary issue of Star Pics Publishing's 250-page *Let's Comic*.

pirates, operated in Thailand before the copyright bill; the resultant stiff competition resulted in the same manga stories being printed by multiple publishers, differentiated only by name, cover art, translation, or paper quality (Sriwittayapaknam School 1995). Since passage of the bill, small firms, unable to obtain copyrights from the Japanese, have folded, leaving about five main manga publishers. And there are fewer pirated copies in circulation, as they have been seized and destroyed, and as a result there is more diversity in manga stories.

The usual concerns have been expressed about Japanese comics' presence in Thailand—that manga in such large proportion adversely affects Thai comics, which, in an effort to compete in a limited market, feel compelled

to imitate; and that some manga themes have a negative impact upon children's behavior. The dean of communications at Thammasat University in Bangkok, who had surveyed preteen children, said that she had a "bad impression [about manga] because it is easy for children to imitate what they like" and because, given the large volume of manga, there was not "an equal flow of information" about Japan and Thailand (Orathai 1993).

Since 2000, Thai comics have had a resurgence. A new group of artists has joined the remaining veterans, partly because of the training schemes and comics awareness activities sponsored by the Cartoon Association of Thailand, established in 1997, and the Cartoon-thai Institute. Other factors account for the revival,





FIG. 12.7. A Dim Sum Studio graphic novel in manga style. 2010. Courtesy of Laksami Wasitnitiwat.

including: (1) previously reluctant investors, particularly mainstream publishers and media firms but others as well, have now embraced the comics industry; (2) educational comic books have found a place in the market; (3) new types of comic books have appeared, such as alternative comics and graphic novels; and (4) large chain bookstores are now devoting considerable shelf space to comic books and graphic novels.

Comics publishing has been on the rise in the 2000s, with the emergence of new companies and continued activity on the part of those already established in the industry. Among new comics firms are Star Pics Publishing, which launched *Let's Comic* magazine in 2004; Green-Panyayan, publishers of the infrequent

comics magazine *I H.A.T.E. Cartoon Book* since 2008; and Bongkoch Publishing, a major publisher of shōjō manga. Bongkoch started in 2003, issuing the monthly *Comic Club* magazine with Japanese and Thai cartoons; in 2008, the company launched *Comic Club Fantasy Red* and *Comic Club Fantasy Blue*, comic books featuring short stories created by Thai females. A Book has also emerged as a comics publisher in recent years. Originally, the company printed magazines and pocket books for upscale teenagers and office workers; A Book comics were not known for “their delicate drawings, but sophisticated and unique storytelling” (Warat 2014). An early comic book published by A Book was *Beansprout and Firehead: In the Infinite Madness* by Songseen

Tewsomboon, first published in 2005 and by 2008 in its seventh reprinting. Another relatively new firm was started by the famous Thai songwriter Boyd Kosiya-bong in 1998, publishing manga-style comics drawn by Thais in its magazines *Katch* and *Manga Katch* (Anutra 2000, 24). Be Boyd Characters, Boyd's animation studio, boasted of owning the copyrights to at least thirty comics and five hundred characters.

Three other publishers new to comics bring out educational comics, a genre that had a renaissance after the mid-2000s. E. Q. Plus Publishing was established in 2004 as an offshoot of Dim Sum Studio (founded in 2000), publisher of the now-defunct *Comic Quest* magazine. E. Q. Plus has innovated comics with a series of biographies of Thai and international historical personalities, the first of which was *Somdej Phra Naresuan Maharaj* (King Naresuan the Great), still the company's best seller. Subject matter has been expanded to include fables, classic novels, folktales and myths, and science. The format of E. Q. Plus books resembles that of Japanese and Korean educational comics in their use of references, timelines, and other explanatory materials.

According to E. Q. Plus cofounder Laksami Wasitniwat, the company publishes about forty to fifty titles yearly, the choice of topics following Thai children's "interest and their school curriculum." She said that the content of E. Q. Plus books is unique: "If educational comics elsewhere has something, for example, on science, then we would do it differently. We have to do that to compete with comics from other countries" (Laksami 2011). Laksami and cofounder Suranit Jumsai na Ayut-thaya were twenty-five and twenty-six, respectively, when they started E. Q. Plus. Dim Sum Studio publishes manga titles but with a difference, using a Japanese style of drawing to impart Thai culture. Suranit was emphatic when he said: "We are telling stories the Thai way" (Suranit 2011). Both managers said that they self-censor their manga to keep out improper content not suitable for Thailand.

Mashima Tojirakarn (2011, 150) summed up the uniqueness of the E. Q. Plus group:

E. Q. Plus is the country's only manga publisher which was founded solely to promote works by Thai artists and to integrate elements of Thai culture into these comics. Moreover, by creating its own business model including novels and educational manga, E. Q. Plus has achieved what no other publisher even did: to survive with Made-in-Thailand works. Although the E. Q. Plus group releases products in manga style, contents and marketing system have been developed originally by Thais to fit domestic conditions, aiming at teenage girls and young ladies in their twenties, mainly in urban areas.

Most E. Q. Plus manga stories are published in series; the first two, hailing from the group's Dim Sum Studio, are *Dang Duang Haru Tai* (published in 2002 in *Comic Quest*) and *Angkor Endless Love*, both romantic in theme.

The Cartoonthai Institute was founded in 2003 by Sudjai Bhromkoed (and others), who obtained support from the Foundation for Children. The institute functions at three levels to enhance cartooning—academic collaboration, networking, and production. Cartoonthai has published comics, starting with *Malet Phan Santiphap* (Seeds of peace) in 2004; its initial educational comic book was *Sipsi Tula Wan Prachathipatai: Banthuek Tamnan Sipsi Tulakhom 2516 Chabap Yaowachon* (October 14, day of democracy: the story of October 14, 1973, for young readers). Recently, comics for teenagers and young adults were added (Warat 2010, 46–47). The Cartoonthai Institute is unique among publishers because it does not pay its artists, most of whom freelance, but instead allows them to retain copyright of their works. Sudjai said that she is seeking creators' rights for all Thai cartoonists (Sudjai 2006).

The third new publisher of educational comics in Thailand is Skybook, a textbook publisher with its own bookstores, started up in 1992. The company's first educational comic book was *Ramakian (Chabap Cartoon)* (Ramayana [cartoon version]) in 2004. Three years later, Skybook began its own educational comic book series, including the five books of *Khun in Ranat Thewada*

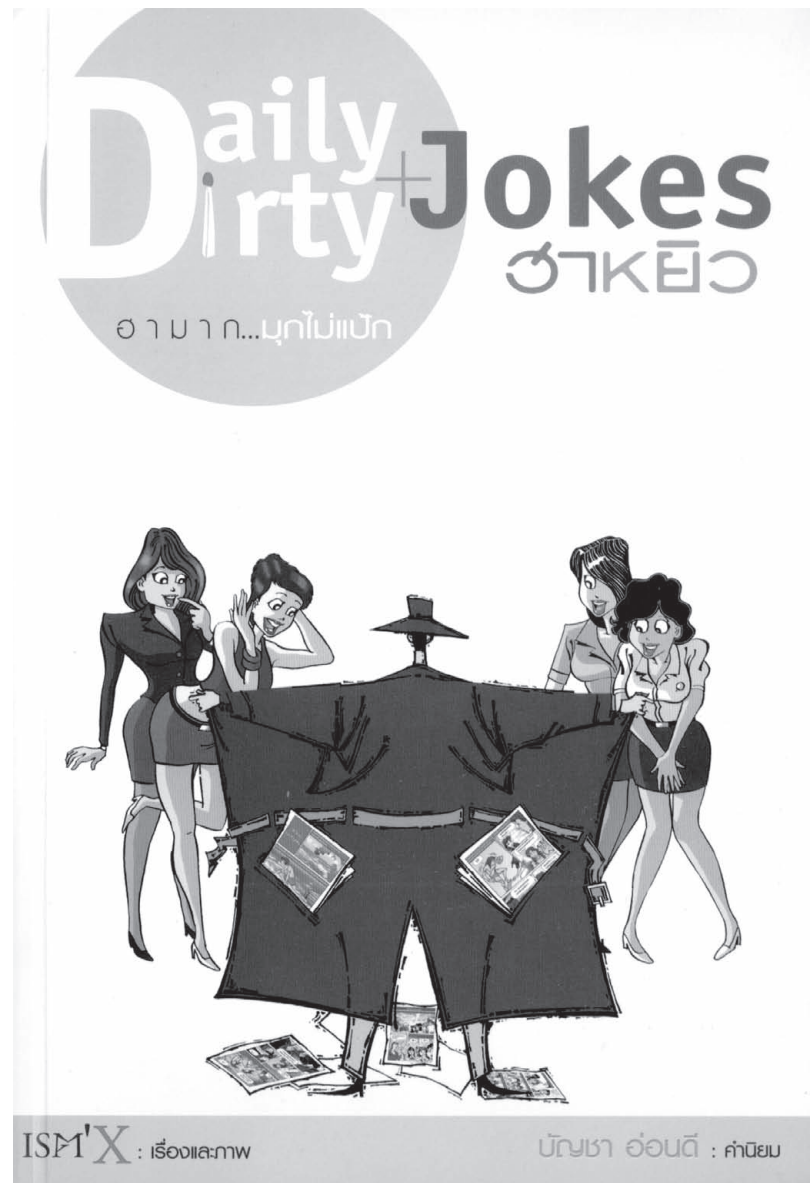


FIG. 12.8. A Manager Group comic book, *Daily Dirty Jokes*, by Yodpongsakul (Yod). 2006. Courtesy of Yodpongsakul.

(Khun-in, God of Xylophone) and *Tamroi Phraphut-thajao 500 Chat* (Tracing the 500 reincarnated lives of Buddha) (Warat 2010, 43–44).

Besides the already mentioned *Chaiyapruek Cartoon*, other educational comics magazines have appeared under the imprint of veteran publishers SE-ED (Science, Engineering, Education), which mainly handled textbooks until it republished a set of nine Japanese science comics as *Witthayasat An Sanuk* (Fun-to-Read Science) in 1985. Amarin Printing and Publishing, Thailand's largest publisher of any type, also bought the publishing rights to two sets of Japanese educational comics in

1993, and later set up a branch, Amarin Comics (Warat 2010, 37–41). Nanmee Books, another veteran publisher, started publishing educational comics in 1993, also by first reprinting an instructive Japanese title, *Doraemon*. What made Nanmee Thailand's largest educational comics firm was the 2006 publication of the Korean-copyrighted *Escape from an Inhabitable Island* and *Escape from the Amazon Jungle*.

Other older comics companies continued to bring out comics, the large percentage of which were entertainment oriented and manga. Banlue Sarn, Vibulkij, Siam Inter-Comic, the Manager Group, the Matichon



Group, and the Nation Multimedia Group are still dominant players. Vibulkij has maintained *Thai Comics* as a monthly magazine with ten series by Thai cartoonists while also publishing Japanese comics magazines such as *Neoz* and *Viva Friday*, while Siam Inter-Comic publishes *C-Kids* and other manga titles. Companies publishing manga usually include Thai content by local artists.

The three mass-media groups, Manager, Matichon, and the Nation, have expanded their comics operations. Burapat (East) Comics Publications, a branch of Manager, issues primarily Hong Kong and Taiwan comics, translated and reprinted in Thailand. Action Frame Kids has been a part of Burapat since 2006; it concentrates on stories about Thai and other Asian historical figures. Action Frame Kids' first publication was *Hanuman Chansamon* (Hanuman, the great fighter), in 2006; another series is *Kraithong* (Crocodile hunter) (Yodpongsakul 2006). Manager has also published *Daily Dirty Jokes*, a 128-page book by cartoonist Yodpongsakul (Yod).

Matichon has kept the Benjarong Group functioning, although the original team of five artists has dwindled to two. In the mid-2000s, the Benjarong Group hired twenty cartoonists to work on a comic book series based on the novel *Living with Great Grandpa*. Staff cartoonist Pon said that the series emphasizes "group values, the types of things the king likes" (Pon 2006).

The Nation Multimedia Group's Nation Entertainment (NED) continues to publish *Boom Comic*. In 2005, Prabda Yoon, the son of the chief executive officer of the Nation Group, Suthichai Yoon, pioneered the publication of alternative content for middle- and upper-class readers by establishing Typhoon Books and its series "hesheit" (he-she-it). The creator of hesheit is Wisut Ponnimit, who, before going to Japan to work in 2004, drew nine book-length comics that mixed cultures, for instance by blending Tokyo and Bangkok street scenes (Nakamura 2006, 25). Bill Randall described Ponnimit's comics as sometimes cute but also incorporating the weird, the fantastic, and the ironic (Randall 2006, 185–90). The hesheit series is drawn in a very rough,



FIG. 12.9. An alternative comic book in the "hesheit" series by Wisut Ponnimit. 2006.

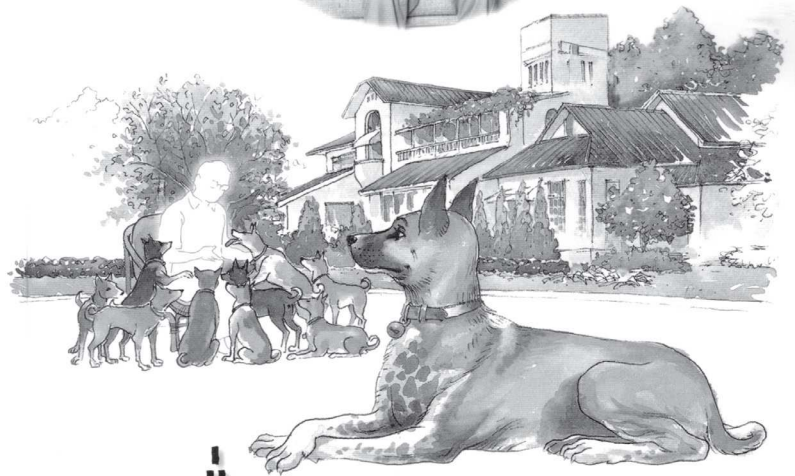
unstructured style with little or no dialogue. Since 2008, Typhoon Books has issued an alternative comics magazine, *Mud*, that appears every three months.

The Nation's Typhoon Books is not the only publisher of trendsetting alternative comics and graphic novels. A Book's *A Day Story Comic* fits both categories, made up of four hundred black-and-white pages created by four artists and featuring content that is somewhat out of the ordinary. As in most parts of the world, graphic novels are popular in Thailand. In fact, what might be considered "graphic novels" predominate in the comics sections of Bangkok bookstores, distinguished by their relatively long length and their concentration on a single theme. Even the *cartoon lem la baht* (one-baht cartoons) sold in night markets, train stations, and bus depots to lower-income readers might be classified as a form of graphic novel. Most consist of about five stories, sixteen pages each, on themes of sex,



พระราชินีพันธุ

พระบาทสมเด็จพระเจ้าอยู่หัวภูมิพลอดุลยเดช  
His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej  
Biography of a Pet Dog



# เรื่องทองแดง

## The Story of Tongdaeng

ฉบับการ์ตูน  Cartoon Version

**FIG. 12.10.** H. M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej's *The Story of Tongdaeng*, illustrated by Thailand's most popular cartoonist, Chai Rachawat. The king was only shown in a white silhouette in the book. 2004. Courtesy of Chai Rachawat.

violence, and ghosts. Publishers of these comics include Cartoon Thai, Samdow, Sri-Udomkij-Sermmit, Pandee Sarn, and Sakol.

As has been shown, comics in Thailand have advanced steadily since the 1990s. With the development of new comics companies along with the Cartoon Association of Thailand and the Cartoonthai Institute, cartoonists have more venues to choose from and are better represented professionally. As a result, their status has been elevated in Thai society, partly relieving a concern about lack of recognition that cartoonists expressed in 1993 interviews.

This change of perception concerning Thai cartooning reached its zenith in 1999 and 2004, when H. M. King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama IX) selected Thailand's most popular cartoonist, Chai Rachawat, to illustrate two books the king had written: *Phra Mahajanaka* (The Great Father) and *Rueang Tongdaeng* (The story of Tongdaeng).<sup>4</sup> Chai, whose achievements in drawing political cartoons and comic strips are unparalleled, called "these books my proudest work" (Chai 2006).

The irony of the king's faith in a cartoonist is not lost, for it was also a king nearly a century before who had helped launch Thai comic art.

## Notes

1. Portrayed are a Chinese pork seller (two-legged), a dog (four-legged), a chair (three-legged), and a single pork leg. Translation by Warat Karuchit.
2. Throughout this chapter, pen names follow real names in parentheses.
3. Vithit Utsahajit envisioned a career in filmmaking, having studied the subject abroad and worked as a crew member on Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*. Upon his return to Thailand, he directed his first movie for Banlue Sarn, *Phi Hua Kat* (The decapitated ghost) (see Rana 1997).
4. Throughout *Rueang Tongdaeng*, the king is never shown directly, only in white silhouette. Chai explained: "It was my idea to draw the king only as a white silhouette. If one paints the king's features realistically, that's no problem. But if I draw him in cartoon style, there will be a lot of problems. People would complain" (Chai 2006).

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**XUẤT  
KHẨU**

**NHẬP KHẨU**



If one looks no further than the language used, the publisher, and the creator, then homegrown Vietnamese comic books would seem to be in abundance. Closer scrutiny, however, discloses that what purport to be Vietnamese comic books usually are pirated foreign titles, with images traced over transparent paper, text translated into Vietnamese, characters given local names, and authorship credited to local artists and writers. The comic books are printed in black and white in the same size as the foreign comics they are copying, for example *Lucky Luke*, *Tintin*, *The Smurfs*, *Batman*, *Spirou*, *Superman*, *Old Master Q*, and Disney titles.

Although inexpensiveness and expediency are the main reasons for such blatant theft of foreign comics, a lingering colonial mentality that considers European products and artistry to be superior to the local plays a role as well. Cartooning was introduced to Vietnam by the Frenchmen Lelan in the 1890s and André Joyeux and Albert Cézard a decade or so later; they were the models for and, in some cases, the teachers of the first generation of Vietnamese cartoonists. The cartoons that the Vietnamese produced in the 1920s and 1930s eventually found sympathy with the “anti-colonial, nationalist and communist movements” (Vann 2010, 83).

Directly or subtly, much of the content of the early cartoons and comic strips dealt with French colonialism. What was probably the country’s first political cartoon, drawn by nationalist leader Ho Chi Minh and published in his revolutionary *Pariah* in 1922, depicted the people’s opposition to the French (Pham 2008). So, too, the earliest ongoing cartoon characters, Ly Toet and Xa Xe, humorously portrayed the difficulties of colonial life, serving as a “way for the Vietnamese elite to comment upon colonial modernisation’s intense disruption of Vietnamese society” and creating a “safe space for subtle political commentary” (Vann 2010, 108).

In the mode of vaudeville comedy teams of the West, Ly Toet was thin while Xa Xe was short and stout. The elderly, traditionally dressed Ly Toet was usually seen muddling his way through various adventures in colonial Vietnam. Ly Toet first appeared in the weekly *Phu Nu Thoi Dam* (Woman today) in 1930, the creation

## Chapter 13

# Vietnam





(Hình số 1)  
Ly Toet đầu tiên, đây là bình thủy tổ của tất cả những Ly Toet khác sau này. Hình vẽ của Đông Sơn.

### Hình ảnh đầu tiên về Lý Toét

FIG. 13.1. Inaugural appearance of Ly Toet in *Phu Nu Thoi Dam*. Nhat Linh. 1930.

of Nhat Linh (pen name Dong Son). From 1932 to 1936, Ly Toet and Xa Xe, drawn by the famous Vietnamese painter Nguyen Gia Tri, appeared in *Phong Hoa* (Culture and customs), an eight-page weekly satirical newspaper started by Nhat Linh. Chí (2011a, 63) wrote that *Phong Hoa* “aimed at using satirical writings and drawings to lash at feudalism, to exhort ‘westernization,’ and to promote individualism.” When the colonial government closed *Phong Hoa*, Ly Toet and Xa Xe moved to the weekly *Ngay Nay* (Today), where they remained from 1936 to 1941. Most cartoons featuring these characters were one panel, but sometimes the pair appeared in comic strips. They were popular enough to be “borrowed” by other newspapers.

Commenting on Ly Toet and Xa Xe, Chí (2011a, 65–66) said that the pair “depicted the uneducated ‘official class’ in the old Vietnamese society. They were used to strongly criticize the backward lifestyle and to reflect the conflicts between outdated values and Western cultures. In addition, they were also used to point out many wicked aspects of the colonial government and local puppet-headed Vietnamese offices: corruption, exploitation, authoritarianism.”

During its brief existence (1934–1935), the weekly *Loa* also contributed to the development of comic art with cultural and political cartoons, caricatures, and educational and entertaining sequential strips, some of which evolved into independent comic books.



FIG. 13.2. A propaganda picture story for the Cultivation Land Reform Campaign. 1953.

Cartooning during Vietnam’s thirty years of war, from 1945 to 1975, was heavily propagandistic, especially in the communist-controlled North. Seldom humorous and nearly indistinguishable from journalistic illustrations, these drawings depicted military life and maneuvers and various government campaigns. Sometimes, they filled the covers of periodicals such as *Thep Moi* (Modern steel), *Van Nghe Ouan Doi* (Military arts), and *Thieu Nhi* (Youngster). The illustrations often were drawn by the famous painters Si Ngoc (Nguyen Si Ngoc), Bui Xuan Phai, Duong Bich Lien, Dang Duc Sinh, Van Da, and Huy Toan. Identified more with cartoons were Mai Van Hien, distinguished by his “humorous and optimistic approach,” and Phan Ke An, drawer of satirical cartoons under the pen name Phan Kich (Trần Văn Can et al. 1987, 73–74).

South Vietnamese cartoons were predominantly entertaining, although some resorted to propaganda; they appeared in newspapers and their supplements, the magazines *Thieu Nhi* (Youngster) and *Tuoi Hoa* (The blossom age), and comic books. Chí (2011a, 73) called the late 1960s to 1975 a “blooming period” for comics in Saigon, with comic series in nearly all the children’s magazines and adult titles gradually emerging. The most popular series was the horror comic *Con Quy Mot Gio* (The one-legged demon, 1965–1968) by Thuong Hong and Chinh Phong. Each issue of the sixteen-page comic book reportedly sold “hundreds of thousands” of copies, necessitating early preorders (Chí 2011a, 73). The early 1970s also spawned the illegal copying of Western comic books.



## DINGO KỂ BẮT CỐC VÔ TÌNH



FIG. 13.3. A pirated Walt Disney comic book. Early 1990s.

For a decade after the North Vietnamese captured Saigon on April 30, 1975, comic art throughout the country was at death's door. Efforts to rejuvenate the comics industry in 1986 initially failed. Copies of Western and Japanese comics prevailed, as evidenced by this author's sampling of comic books in Hanoi as late as 1993 that showed very close resemblances to foreign characters, plots, and styles. Some books were mere translations with credits to original artists, such as Fujiko F. Fujio's *Doraemon*; others made no mention of their original foreign authors. The comic book *Walt Disney's Dingo: Ke Bat Coc Vo Tinh* listed only Vietnamese names among

the credited artists and writers, although Disney was credited as part of the title.

Comic books in Vietnam in 1993 were either a horizontally elongated seven and a half by five inches, or a digest-size five by seven and a half inches. One horizontal book was *Hoang Tu A Phay Ma Ni*, published as a series with each issue at sixty-four pages, detailing the story of a Thai prince named A Phay Ma Ni. The simply drawn artwork was formatted in four rectangular panels per page. The vertical, digest-size books had sixteen pages, each with different panel sizes and shapes concentrated on a single story. Among the titles were



FIG. 13.4. *Hoàng Tử A Phay Ma Ni*, a series about a Thai prince named A Phay Ma Ni. 1993.

*Diet Tru Hiem Hoa*, about a female aviator; the Japanese-based *Bon San Tim Ngươi Song*, and *Oan Hon Xet Xu*, featuring Western characters. All the books were published on coarse paper of a color other than white. For example, the Disney *Dingo* comic was printed, in no discernable pattern, on pages that were red, blue, green, and brown.

After Kim Dong Publishing House introduced *Doraemon* without a license in 1992, manga captured the Vietnamese comics market. In its first three years in Vietnam, *Doraemon* appeared in a hundred episodes with total sales of fifty million copies, a record that has never been surpassed. Such phenomenal success led Kim Dong and other companies, particularly Dong Nai and Tuoi Tre Publishing Houses, to publish large numbers of manga books. From then on, manga and other foreign titles flooded Vietnam almost unchecked. Of the estimated weekly sales of six hundred thousand comic books in 2002, 95 percent were of foreign origin, from Japan, China, and the West (Tran Dinh 2002). Because

the content of foreign comic books was often bloody and violent, and to a degree sexually explicit, parents, educators, and government agencies all expressed their dismay. Some publishers heeded the critics and suspended the printing of some foreign series singled out as particularly brutal; others introduced educational comics from abroad as an alternative.

Vietnam's signing of the Berne Convention in 2004 forced some publishers to recognize foreign copyrights, but, because of lax enforcement, pirating continued almost unabated. Regulations occasionally facilitated speedier and simpler publishing procedures. One law enacted in 2005 allowed companies to publish a book seven days after registration with the Publication Administration of the Ministry of Information and Communications, without waiting for approval. The regulatory system failed because of a shortage of inspectors and incommensurate maximum fines (US\$1,829 in 2008). A revision of the law in 2009 mandated that all books must be registered with the Publication





FIG. 13.5. *Thần Đồng Dật Việt* (The Vietnamese prodigy), based on Vietnamese folklore and very popular in Vietnam. 2010.

Administration and that publishers could publish only approved content.

Recent efforts to stiffen regulations for manga were prompted by outcries by educators, parents, and psychiatrists, the latter claiming that manga excited Vietnamese teenagers, who normally led quiet lives (*VietNamNet* 2008b), and that salacious Japanese stories provided misinformation about sex. Thanh Hoa Publishing House and Van Hoa–Thong Tin Publisher were condemned in 2008 for not respecting copyright and not properly submitting their titles to the Publication Administration. For example, Thanh Hoa’s *Chàng Trai Trong Truyện Tranh* (The boy in manga) contained no author’s credits except for a note that the book was “made by Ly Lien.” Other titles of these publishers, such as *Ichigo–Ky Niệm Xanh* (Ichigo: one hundred percent) and *Crazy Kiss*,



FIG. 13.6. *Thần Đồng Dật Việt Fan Club*, drawn by fans. 2004.

were sharply criticized for displaying, on their covers, scantily clad characters including women in their underwear. The books’ availability at newsstands and book rental shops near schools at the affordable daily rental price of one thousand to fifteen hundred dong (six to nine U.S. cents) was particularly worrisome.

Local artists and publishers attempted to produce their own comic books for the manga-infested market throughout the 1990s and 2000s, with isolated instances of success, such as *Dung si Hesman* (Hesman the hero) by Hung Lan and *Thần Đồng Dật Việt* (The Vietnamese prodigy). *Dung si Hesman*, an adaptation of the anime series *Voltron*, was a hybrid that imitated the Japanese characters but used plots created by Hung Lan. From 1992 to 1995, 159 issues were published with a peak single-issue sale of several hundred thousand copies

(Chí 2011a, 76). *Than Dong Dat Viet* has a more legitimate claim to being Vietnamese, since it is based on a traditional folktale about a boy genius, Trang Ti, and his friends. Started in 2003 and continuing to the present, each issue of *Than Dong Dat Viet* consists of 112 pages in slightly smaller than digest format, printed in black and white with a color cover. Through tie-ins with Marvel, DC, and Dark Horse of the United States, the first thirty-eight issues of *Than Dong Dat Viet* were made available to an American audience. For a while, *Dat Viet* had a companion comic book, *Fan Club*, drawn by its fans.

Also striving to present comic books more representative of Vietnamese society is Vuong Quoc Thinh, who formed the company Art/Sign Comic and Animation with friends while he was studying architecture. He decided to preserve and present his country's culture through comics after he questioned why "girls in Vietnam knew a lot about the New Year festival for Japanese girls through *Doraemon* but little about the legend of *cay neu* (New Year Tree) of Viet Nam" (*VietNamNet/Viet Nam News* 2009). Vuong Quoc Thinh attempts to educate children about Vietnamese culture through fairy tales, to which his writers and artists add modern touches. Among the seven comic books he introduced in 2009 were *Banh Chung Banh Day* (Square and round glutinous rice cakes) and *Su Tich Dua Hau* (The legend of the watermelon). An example of mixing traditional stories with contemporary culture, *Banh Chung Banh Day* is a fable about a young prince who dreams that a god tells him how to prepare a special rice dish to offer his father, the king; in this funny comic book, the prince dreams that he has entered a popular television cooking contest. In addition to such fairy tales, Art/Sign adapts works of Nguyen Nhat Anh, a best-selling writer of children and teenager stories.

Other writers produced comic books that were Vietnamese originated, but most did not last long. *Bi Bo and Kim Quy* by Quang Toan successfully portrayed Vietnamese characters and culture, as did *Tu Sach Ba Lo Xanh* (The green backpack collection, 2000), featuring comics by the Vietnamese Belgian artist Vinh Khoa (VinK). *Tu Sach Ba Lo Xanh* died after just three issues.

Several monthly magazines collecting local comics met the same fate, their readership drained away by manga or put off by the low-quality workmanship of their young, amateur cartoonists (Chí 2011a, 80). They included *Truyen Tranh Tre* (Young comics), *M'Heaven*, *Than Dong Dat Viet Fan Club*, and *Truyen Tranh Viet* 13+.

New comics ventures continue to surface. TV Comics, with the motto "Vietnamese comics for Vietnamese people," is using the talent of comics leaders Hung Lan, Duc Lam, and Ngoc Linh to bring out local fare; and Phan Thi, publisher of *Than Dong Dat Viet*, operates an online Vietnamese comics magazine, *Truyen Tranh Viet Online* (Vietnamese comics online), and *Danh Tac Viet Nam* (Vietnam's masterpieces), a series that adapts Vietnam's literary classics to comics (Chí 2011a, 80). Individually, young cartoonists Nguyen Thanh Phong, Ta Lan Hanh, and Chí Dó Huú have begun to make their mark with their award-winning comics stories *Orange*, *Steps*, and *Ngo*, respectively.

The Internet has also helped, an example being the 2011 online release of the comic strip *Dat Rong* (Dragon's Land). Dimension Art, a group of ten young artists, created the strip and first posted ten free episodes online to gauge response before publishing it. The story revolves around the Vietnamese legend of Son Tinh–Thuy Tinh (Mountain God versus Water God), a story full of romance, adventure, and the traditional conflict between good and evil. The strip incorporates current events and strives to speak the language of modern youth (*Vietweek* 2012).

Generally, sales of Vietnamese comics top out at two to three thousand copies of an issue nationwide; readership is slightly higher because of comics rental shops. Not many local comics seem to be displayed, as witnessed by this author at Ho Chi Minh City's largest bookstore, Fahasa, in June 2010. Although two long rows were crammed with comic books (and with children standing or sitting on the floor engrossed in reading them), the majority of titles were manga. Others came from China, Korea, and Taiwan. Among them was *Tam Mao*, a copy of China's classic *Sanmao*, with no credit to its creator, Zhang Leping, and copyrighted by Jilin Fine

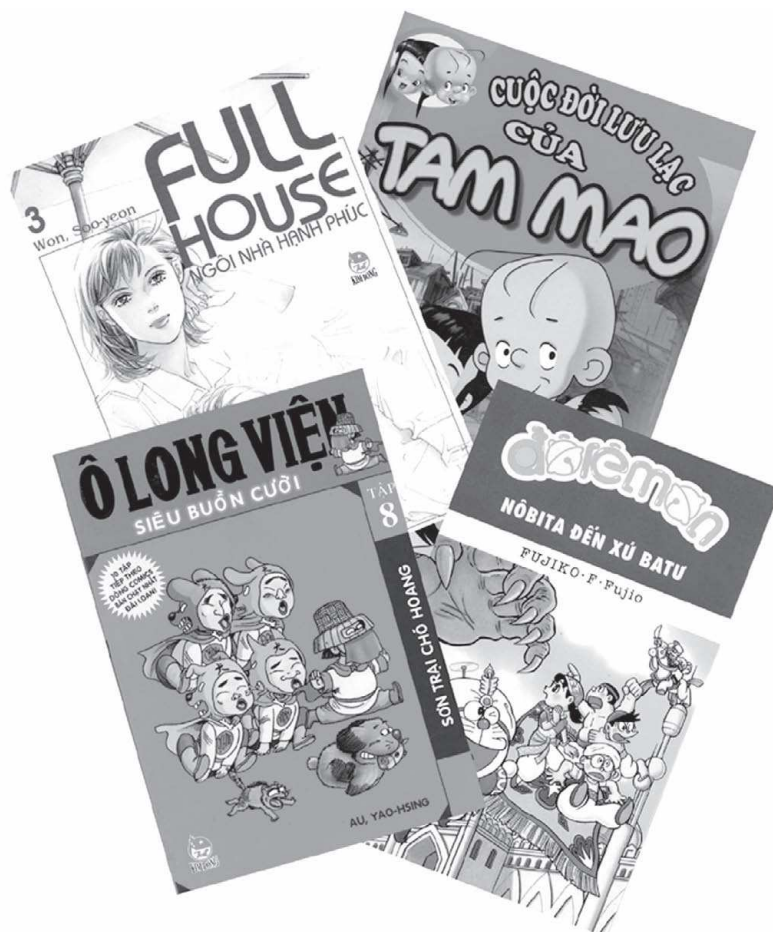


FIG. 13.7. Among the translated titles on display in Ho Chi Minh City's largest bookstore: *Full House* (South Korea), *Tam Mao* (China), *O Long Vien* (Taiwan), and *Doraemon* (Japan).

Arts Press of China in 2006 and Tanviet Investment and Development Company of Vietnam in 2009. Some settings in *Tam Mao* seemed to be Vietnamese. Also on the racks were *Full House*, a Vietnamese version of South Korean Won Soo-Yeon's comic, with translation rights arranged through Seoul Cultural Publishers; and *O Long Vien* by Ao Yu-hsiang of Taiwan, with the Vietnamese translation copyright held by Kim Dong Publishing House (Hanoi) through an arrangement with Ao. Prices of comic and picture books at Fahasa ranged from ten thousand dong (US\$0.53) for local titles such as *Xi Xon on line* and *Sang Tao Vietnam* to a high of twenty-five thousand dong (US\$1.32) for *Tam Mao*.

The two largest comic book publishers in Vietnam today are the fifty-year-old Kim Dong Publishing House and Tuoi Tre Publishing House, in existence for about twenty years; both are controlled by the national government, as is all publishing in the country. Following established procedure, all books, including comics, must carry the name of a company and a government

publisher. For example, *Than Dong Dat Viet's* company is Phan Thi; the publisher is Van Hoa Sai Gon. The company is responsible for commissioning creators, printing, and production, but it must first obtain permission from the publisher on how many copies to print, how often, and other details (Chí 2010). It takes about two weeks to obtain the permit, which must indicate that the original publisher authorized the printing. Duong Thanh Hoai (2010) said that the government holds up permits when it detects sexual, political, and violent content, but that its major concern is political commentary. Specific government regulations on what to avoid do not exist, only "very general documents, very general laws, and no decrees solely for comic books," allowing the authorities "to arrest you at any time" (Duong 2010). As for sexual content, Duong (2010) said: "Sometimes, the government will go along with nudity, sometimes not. Naked foreigners are okay; Vietnamese, no. The books can show kissing between Vietnamese, but they cannot be naked." Lately, some young cartoonists working online





FIG. 13.8. Nguyễn Thanh Phong's controversial *Sát Thủ Đầu Mưng Mủ* (Killer with a festering head). 2011.

have defied the authorities, who have been unable to effectively control Internet content.

The most celebrated case of censorship gone awry was that of *Sát Thủ Đầu Mưng Mủ* (Killer with a festering head), created by Nguyễn Thanh Phong in 2011. Although the book was recalled two weeks after its release, Vietnamese continued to read it online, or they bought bootleg copies on the street. A digital version was sold on Amazon.com. Within a couple months, it had sold ten thousand copies (Chí 2011b; see also Ives 2012). *Sát Thủ Đầu Mưng Mủ* had been declared illegal for broaching politically sensitive issues, debasing the Vietnamese language, and displaying violence. The pocket-size book of 120 illustrations, satirizing contemporary Vietnamese life and social issues (e.g., hunger, domestic violence, wildlife trafficking), uses rhyming one-liners that mimic the street slang castigated by older Vietnamese, each accompanied by a funny drawing. One example illustrating hunger depicts a wolf who is so hungry that he has nothing to void, his anus so inactive that spiders build webs over it.

Besides vaguely stated, inconsistent, and poorly enforced government policies, other factors impair the

comics profession in Vietnam. Topping the list is the need for professional training, and in a style other than manga (Chí 2010). What universities do teach is “how to repeat and imitate, not how to create,” according to Chí (2010). Ta Huy Long of Kim Dong Publishing House said that Vietnamese comics suffer from weak scripts, because cartoonists are not trained systematically and don't give adequate attention to what they consider to be merely side jobs (*VietNamNet* 2009). In Vietnam, according to one source, artists are not involved in scriptwriting and development; they are given scripts to illustrate, leading to an “unclear structure between episodes” (*VietNamNet* 2009). Tran Dinh Thanh Lam (2002) felt that the way comics are perceived in Vietnam is the problem, saying that writers want to do adult literary-type books, not those for children.

Piracy also plays havoc with nourishing the comics and children's book industries, as Duong (2010) explained:

If we reach a large circulation [with children's books], fake publishers recognize our sales and bring out fake books in a hurry. Then we can't sell more, because of the abundance

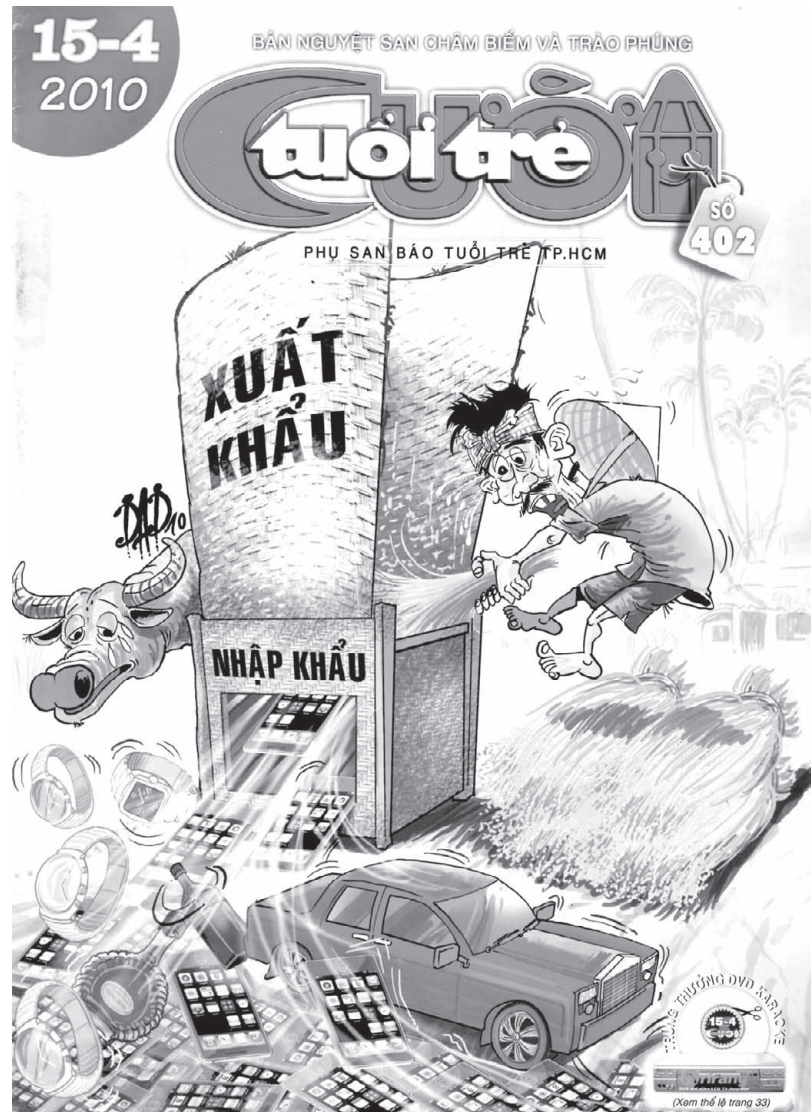


FIG. 13.9. The cartoon-laden *Tuoi Tre Cuoi*, no. 402, 2010.

of fake editions that are priced more cheaply. On the fake books, publishers put the names of their own staff as artists and writers, though our artists and writers did the books. We can complain, but nothing happens. The situation is very complicated, bureaucratic. People who sell books on the streets are selling fake editions. There is no check on them. Sometimes, we even buy the fake books.

Besides comic books, additional venues for cartoonists are humor and children's magazines and newspaper comic strips. The bimonthly humor periodical *Tuoi Tre Cuoi* (Youth laugh) was conceived by Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet in 1984. Most of *Tuoi Tre Cuoi* is satirical, often poking fun at corruption and the nouveau riche, but rarely if ever directing its humor at any individual. Although it contends to be nonpolitical, it has printed

cartoons that border on criticism of the government, such as one by Nop years ago showing an office with a bottomless opinion box placed over a garbage pail (Keenan 1997, 45). An offshoot of the daily *Tuoi Tre* (Youth), *Tuoi Tre Cuoi* is loaded with cartoons, illustrated jokes, and caricatures on nearly every page. In 1997, when circulation was two hundred thousand copies, the magazine inspired the creation of a popular stage show in Ho Chi Minh City. Faith Keenan (1997, 44) wrote at the time that the "magazine and its theatrical offspring are setting the agenda for modern satire in Vietnam."

Children's magazines have also used cartoons and illustrations freely to spruce up inspirational stories, games, and jokes. *Thieu Nien*, designed for the eleven-to fifteen-year-old age group, is currently published as part of the daily *Tien Phong*. Besides numerous drawings



accompanying entertaining stories and jokes, *Thieu Nien* also carries two-page color spreads of *Doraemon* translated into Vietnamese and a serialized Vietnamese story set in the past called *Tu-Mac*. Nha Nam Publishing and Communications has issued a series of children's books printed on high-quality paper and in brilliant color, some of which are illustrated by cartoonists.

topics. Two other days of the week, the paper printed what one department head called “black *Nhan Dan*,” a six- to eight-inch short feature that was illustrated (Kong Ngoan 1993). The sixteen-page Sunday *Nhan Dan* used tiny illustrations and cartoons of one column or less on nearly every page; there were twenty-one in one issue that this author examined.

## Southeast Asia



Hanoi's second-largest daily, *Tienphong Chu Nhat*, although oriented toward youth, did little better with respect to cartoons. In a typical week, perhaps three or four cartoons of any type appeared, as well as some short story illustrations drawn by the company's three full-time artists and its occasional, sometimes unpaid, freelancers (Chung 1993). The paper's sister monthly, *Tienphong Cuoithang*, devoted its last page to jokes with cartoons submitted by freelance artists. The city's third daily, *Hanoi Moi*, was also four pages in length. An issue that this author saw carried a two-column illustration and a tiny seven-panel cartoon story.

The situation had worsened by 2010. The two most popular dailies in Ho Chi Minh City, *Thanh Nien* and *Tuoi Tre*, were nearly devoid of cartoons and illustrations; the papers had many pages, but they were mostly full of advertisements. Occasionally, *Thanh Nien* had a cartoon by the artist "Dad" illustrating a story, and the paper's weekly used one illustration on the children's page. *Tuoi Tre*'s cartoon output was a two-column color cartoon entitled *Biem Hoa* by Sate; a two-column color sports cartoon; and cartoons by Nop. However, these cartoons were spaced over a few days, and seldom did more than one appear on any given day.

Overall, Vietnamese comic art has strengthened since the mid-2000s; however, one big hurdle must be cleared, namely improving the status of cartooning in the eyes of the Vietnamese government, art establishment, and public. The cartoonist Phan Ke An perhaps best summed up the situation: "I feel happiness and self-pity today because cartoons are considered a clown on the stage or an abandoned child of the arts" (*VietNamNet* 2007).

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# South Asia





# উদ্ভিদ

মূল্য : ঈদ বাজেট ফেল!  
২৫টাকা!



## Brief History

It is not unusual that, in many parts of the world, cartooning was born and nourished during nationalist revolutions and drives toward independence. In what is now Bangladesh (previously East Pakistan and British India), political cartoons and an occasional comic strip appeared as early as 1930, but it was from the beginning of the Language Movement in the late 1940s to the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 that cartooning got its footing.

After India and Pakistan gained independence as two separate nations in 1947, friction ran high between West and East Pakistan—separated from each other by more than a thousand miles—over political dominance and linguistic, cultural, and ethnic differences. In 1948, the government of Pakistan declared Urdu the country's sole national language, sparking extensive protests in Bengali-speaking East Pakistan. The national government reacted by outlawing public meetings, and, when University of Dhaka students and other protestors defied the order on February 21, 1952, the military opened fire, killing some of the demonstrators. From then on, widespread discontent was fueled by the Awami Muslim League and, to a lesser degree, by cartoonists.

Among the early patriot cartoonists was Kazi Abul Kasem (pen name Dopiaza), who began his career in Calcutta in 1930, drawing political and social cartoons and a comic strip. In India, he was popular for attacking British colonialism and illustrating literary verses as cartoons, a practice that he continued later in Bangladesh. Kasem was also known for illustrating *Food Conference*, a 1943 satirical book on the politics behind the Bengal famine of that year, and he gained fame as an important writer, painter, and early animator. (He worked on the Indian animation *Shabash* [Bravo] in 1946.) Kasem (1993) said that he had “to fly away” from Calcutta in 1950 because of communal riots. Since only a few magazines existed in East Pakistan and he was unique as a Muslim cartoonist, he said that many opportunities to publish came his way in his new homeland. Some of his cartoons appeared in the *Daily Azad* in the 1930s when

## Chapter 14

# Bangladesh



FIG. 14.1. Pioneer Bangladeshi cartoonist Kazi Abul Kasem (left), with *Cartoon Magazine* publisher Mohammad Harun-Or-Rashid (center) and the author in Kasem's home. Dhaka, July 28, 1993.

the daily was published in Calcutta, and also later after it transferred to Dhaka in October 1948.<sup>1</sup>

Mahmud Shah Qureshi (1980, 26), one of the few writers who have traced the origins of Bangladeshi cartooning, gave vague references to cartoons appearing in two literary periodicals probably of the 1940s—Rajshekh-har Basu's *Goddalika* and Abul Mansur Ahmad's *Ayna* (The mirror)—saying: "The illustrations in the . . . two publications are based on foibles of human nature and the disjunctures of society, but they so well pinpoint certain emotional aspects of Bengali society that they are still popular." He also mentioned cartoons by Quamrul Hassan and Zainul Abedin, both of whom became doyens of the country's fine arts. Abedin drew "stirring sketches" of the Bengal famine and "caricatures of the political events of the day" (Qureshi 1980, 27).

Besides Kasem and Hassan, other artists drawing vitriolic cartoons during the Language Movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the subsequent independence period were Qayyum Chowdhury (pen name Qa-Chow), Rashid Chowdhury, Murtoza Bashir, Debdas Chakravarty, Mizanur Rahim, Mostafa Aziz, Mahmud Zamir, Subhash Dutta (Mita), Kalam Mahmud (pen names Birbal and Titu), Hasheem Khan (Chabi Khan), Nazrul Islam (Nazrul), Rafiqun Nabi (Ranabi), Serajul Hug (Sarda), and Banizul Huq (Bamiz). Their works were displayed on posters, banners, placards, and leaflets, and in small magazines, "like the French did during their revolution," according to Ranabi (1993), who was active in these campaigns.

Of course, newspapers such as the *Daily Azad*, *Purbadesh*, the *Morning News*, and *Dainik Bangla* provided outlets, as did general-circulation magazines such as the weekly *Bichitra* (an offshoot of *Dainik Bangla*), the *Weekly Forum*, and the monthly *Sacitra Sandhani*. Qureshi (1980, 27) gave *Bichitra* credit for playing "a major role in popularizing cartoons in Bangladesh. Its awareness of the role it plays in mixing a few objective chuckles with the solemn business of nation-building is shown by an advertisement it used to carry: 'Don't read *Bichitra* if you are not free of prejudices.'" Closely associated with *Bichitra* were cartoonists Birbal, Nazrul, Ranabi, and Lutful (Syed Lutful Huq), the latter the reillustrator of the Western strip *Barbarella*. At *Sacitra Sandhani*, many of the cartoons were done by Titu, Mahmud Zamir, Mustafa Monwar (Montoo), and Subhash Dutta, the latter recognized also as a filmmaker. Ranabi (1993) praised the *Weekly Forum* as the "only publication to start using political cartoons in Bangladesh by Bangladeshi cartoonists." Published and edited by Dr. Kamal Hussein and Rehman Sobhan, the tabloid was filled with political cartoons from 1969 until March 25, 1971, when the war started.

The two years prior to the war between East and West Pakistan were crucial to building a strong cartooning tradition, according to Ranabi (1993), who added that, although some of the works were "crude," they depicted the "political failure of [West] Pakistanis, their mismanagement, their hatred of Bengali people."

A few cartoonists paid a heavy price for their participation in political movements. Murtoza Bashir, an activist already in 1948 at age sixteen, was arrested and jailed for five months in 1950; nevertheless, he remained steadfast to the goals of liberation, often drawing cartoons about the martyrs of the Language Movement and the independence struggle. In the immediate postindependence period, self-named "freedom fighter" and cartoonist Saiful Alam was jailed from 1975 to 1978 for his political beliefs tied to the popular socialist party, the Chhara League. Government retaliation of this sort sometimes had a cooling effect on cartoonists, as Qureshi (1980, 27) indicated: "Their criticism . . . is



cautious and muted, perhaps showing more what publishers will risk publishing than what cartoonists would like to draw. Many of these cartoons seem to project a kind of frustration instead of instantly touching our funny bone. They only succeed in producing a muttered response of ‘All too true.’” Bangladeshi cartoonists, on occasion, have been fierce. Examples that come to mind are Quamrul Hasan’s cartoon poster “Annihilate This Beast” (referring to Pakistani president Yahya Khan) during the 1971 war, and Saiful Alam’s *Shandwip*, a magazine cartoon created on President Hussain Muhammad Ershad’s departure from power in 1990, showing him, Yahya Khan, and Hitler, all with garlands of skulls around their necks.

### Comic Strips, Humor/Cartoon Magazines, and Comic Books

Comic strips have been rare in Bangladesh’s history (Islam 1993). The *Morning News* in Dhaka introduced comic strips in the 1950s, mainly drawn by two artists named Aziz (one of whom was Mostafa); and *Dainik Bangla* at one time featured a strip series called *Pra-tidvandvi* (The rivals). No doubt there were others that have faded from the record. One strip that stands out as the most popular and longest lasting is *Tokai* by Rafiqun Nabi (Ranabi), started in 1977 in *Bichitra*. The idea for a comic strip that was “something like Charlie Brown” came to Ranabi in the late 1960s. As he recalled, “I couldn’t do it at that time. Then, after independence, I was almost ready to do it and the weekly *Bichitra* was ready to publish it, but I went to Greece in 1973 to study” (Ranabi 1993). Upon his return in 1976, Ranabi began drawing cartoons for *Bichitra*, during which time he again proposed doing a strip; *Bichitra* accepted the idea. Ranabi (1993) said that he spent two years conceptualizing *Tokai*, remembering that he fretted:

How to do it? Which part of society should he come from? Charlie Brown is from the upper deck of society [actually, the middle class], but this was not needed in Bangladesh. I



FIG. 14.2. Tokai, as drawn by Ranabi (Rafiqun Nabi) for the author. Dhaka, July 26, 1993. Courtesy of Ranabi.

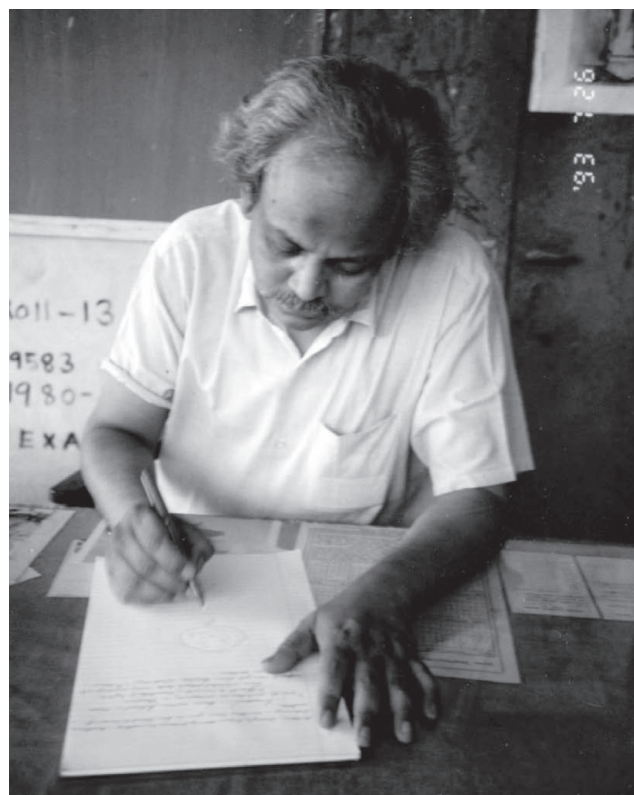


FIG. 14.3. Ranabi drawing Tokai. Dhaka, July 26, 1993. Photo by John A. Lent.

knew a small boy called Mochtar;<sup>2</sup> who was sick with liver problems, with a distended stomach. Mochtar always sat in front of my door, his stomach big, holding his lungi. He always asked me, “What time is it?” After knowing him for six to eight months, he died. So, the portrait for Tokai I got from this boy. Not exactly . . . for instance, not the bald head.

*Tokai* first ran in *Bichitra* on May 17, 1978, and remained there until it was shifted to the weekly magazine *Weekly 2000* in 1999.

Tokai was a poor street boy with a near-bald head and thin limbs. He was described by *Daily Star* reporter Harun ur Rashid (2004) as a street urchin who lives “on the footpaths or in the big unused construction pipes strewn about this city of Dhaka. He lives on leftovers of others or food thrown away in dustbins. Despite the apparent destitute status, however, the boy is always cheerful making fun and uttering witty scathing reflections,<sup>3</sup> in his usual Dhakaite language, on things around him, which constitute contemporary society.” Ranabi (1993) said that Tokai was an ideal character portraying many children in Bangladesh.

To Ranabi’s surprise, Bangladeshis enthusiastically accepted Tokai, sending in suggestions for the strip and scolding Ranabi when they thought he was not taking proper care of the character or not dealing with certain social problems. Ranabi (1993) talked about the audience feedback:

My readers think they have some participation in this cartoon. Many send me subjects. They write: “Yesterday, I saw something very interesting.” But, it is not very interesting at all. They say, “You should do something about it and please mention my name in the strip.” They ask, “Why is Tokai on the roads and in Dhaka? He should be in the village.” So, I had to change him around. I took him to the rural areas for a while, and after six months, I got him back. In the beginning, one week, I’d draw three hairs on his head, another time, four hairs. Letters came in: “How many hairs does Tokai have?” So, I gave him three. Once, I put shorts on Tokai. Immediately, there was an objection: “He should wear a lungi.” In winter, letters come in saying: “Put some clothes on him.” Sometimes, I change Tokai according to reader reaction; sometimes, I don’t.

Readers expect to find social or political messages in *Tokai* and often read unintended meanings into the strip. Ranabi (1993) said: “I had not written anything on politics, but readers always find politics [associated with

Tokai] so that he now is considered a social character.”<sup>4</sup> Because of this reader demand, Ranabi has placed messages in *Tokai*—not “direct political” ones but those with social and current events themes. As a result, Ranabi (1993) said that *Tokai* reads like a history of Bangladesh because of its featuring of current events. When this author interviewed Ranabi in 1993, Bangladesh was experiencing one of its perennial floods. The next day, *Tokai* addressed the floods. “If it didn’t,” Ranabi said, “hundreds of letters would arrive, asking, ‘Why didn’t you say anything about the floods?’”

Ranabi ensures that *Tokai* is relevant to the daily experiences of the common people and that his drawings are simple, a “bit illustrative, a bit realistic for our general readers who do not have aesthetic richness.” He has also taken upon himself the task of explaining subject matter to his readers and even enlightening them on the nature of cartoons. He said: “When there was a story about a sky lab falling, I had to explain this to the readers. They had no knowledge of a sky lab. So, I asked in *Tokai* what would happen if it fell in Bangladesh. I showed how some people would make it into a fair, some would check to see if there were dollars in it. You need a local reference level for cartoons” (Ranabi 1993). Reflecting on Bangladeshi readers’ comics illiteracy, Ranabi (1993) told how he explained to them the concept of time in *Tokai*: “They’d ask: ‘Why doesn’t Tokai grow up?’ I used to say, ‘In cartoons, it happens they don’t grow up.’ I told the readers, ‘In cartoons, one day might be ten thousand years.’ Readers are very simple minded; they don’t want complicated situations. They don’t bother about wit—whether it is in the cartoon. They take the cartoon information and ask, ‘Is it for the people or not?’ and they make it their own. Some people don’t want any explanations; they have their own explanations.”

Ranabi (1993) said that the word “tokai” had no original meaning when he applied it to his character, but Bangladeshis began using it to describe poverty and unalleviated frustration. In 1990, the word “tokai” was added to the Bengali dictionary. A few times, the associations and implications of the word have led to



FIG. 14.4. *Basic Ali* by Shahriar Kabir, one of the humorous strips in *Prothom Alo*.

embarrassing and even almost riotous situations. For example, on one occasion when journalists came to interview Ranabi in his home, they were disappointed to discover that he owned a sofa set and a television. “Why do you have these? Do something for those kids; practice what you preach,” they said, according to Ranabi (1993). On another occasion, a confectionery shop that had capitalized on the character’s popularity and called itself Tokai was forced to close when hundreds of organized poor people (tokai) descended on it, demanding bread, ice cream, and other delicacies because they said that it was their shop.

In 1993, Ranabi said that he wanted to terminate the strip, but the demand for it did not allow him. By 2004, he had changed his mind, saying that he would “carry on” because the continuing poverty and widening gap between the rich and the poor in Bangladesh had convinced him that Tokai was as relevant then as in 1978. Ranabi still draws *Tokai* while maintaining a professorship at the Institute of Fine Arts, University of Dhaka, where he has taught most of the country’s young cartoonists (see Lent 2012).

Comic strips in Bangladesh today are most likely to be found in the humor/cartoon supplements carried by daily newspapers on a weekly basis. Chittagong University professor of communications Mohammad Sahid Ullah (2012) said that the sixteen-page supplements have helped popularize new newspapers that have been

started up by the corporate sector investing in mass media. All major dailies have supplements, each dealing with a designated topic. *Prothom Alo*, for example, has a different supplement for each day of the week, featuring sports, psychology, information technology, happiness, health and well-being, lifestyle, science, and humor. *Rosh+Alo* (Humor and light), which uses many cartoons and comics, is published on Mondays. The three- to four-panel *Basic Ali* by Shahriar Kabir is one *Prothom Alo* humor comic strip. Among other humor/cartoon supplements are *Pachal* (Gossip, in *Samakal*), *Magaz Dholai* (Brainwash, in *Kalerkhontha*), and *Bich-hchhu* (Woodpecker, in *Jugantor*). These supplements invite theme-oriented works, arrange competitions, and generally encourage amateur cartoonists. The English-language press does not issue humor/cartoon supplements (Sahid Ullah 2012).

Humor/cartoon magazines as separate entities (not as newspaper supplements) made their appearance with *Unmad* in 1978 and *Cartoon Magazine* in 1980. Editor Ahsan Habib (1993) takes credit for starting *Unmad* with five of his friends, although the magazine’s website (<http://everything.explained.at/Unmad>) lists friends Ishtiaq Hossain and Khalid Ashar as the founders.

Patterned after (“but not copied from”) *Mad* magazine in the United States, *Unmad* started off as an adless quarterly magazine; it converted to a monthly in 1991. Habib (1993) feared that advertisements would influence





FIG. 14.5. The 1993 Eid edition of *Unmad* magazine. Courtesy of Ahsan Habib.

editorial content; furthermore, advertisers were not known for paying on time. At its peak, *Unmad* printed fifteen thousand copies per issue; the current figure listed on their website is ten to twelve thousand copies.

Normally, *Unmad* contains twenty-eight pages of eight to ten features, each done by a different cartoonist poking fun at issues such as overpopulation, culture, street people, economics, the rainy season, television series (foreign and domestic), movies, and day-to-day problems. The most popular feature is “*Unmad* in News Reporting,” in which the rather ugly magazine mascot, Unmad, goes to different places to report on events in a humorous manner. *Unmad* also has two larger special issues at Eid.

The breakdown of production and distribution costs at the time this author interviewed Ahsan Habib in 1993 included 40 percent each to production (overhead, printing, cartoonists’ fees, etc.) and distribution,



FIG. 14.6. Saeed Bari (left) of Suchi Patra comic books and Ahsan Habib, publisher of *Unmad* magazine. Dhaka, July 25, 1993. Photo by John A. Lent.



FIG. 14.7. The cover of the August 1990 issue of *Cartoon Magazine*, depicting a laborer's "toil" to make his boss richer. Courtesy of Mohammad Harun-Or-Rashid.

with a profit margin of 20 percent. An issue sold for ten taka (twenty-five U.S. cents). Habib (1993) said that *Unmad* cartoonists were paid up to ten times more per comic than those working for newspapers. Over the years, the company branched out into publishing comic books, an early one being *Durunta* (Turbulence), and opening its own retail store where *Unmad* T-shirts, mugs, key chains, and other gift items are sold. It has also done much to support cartooning in Bangladesh, training artists and giving them their first publishing opportunities, organizing exhibitions, and granting best cartoonist awards.

*Cartoon Magazine*, which lasted about a decade, a relatively old age for humor/cartoon magazines anywhere, almost did not get off the ground. Publisher/editor Mohammad Harun-Or-Rashid (1993) said that he was denied government registry on five occasions

because the authorities thought he would use the magazine to attack them. Harun (1993) remembered: "I tried to reassure them that was not my intent; I told them it was to be a children's magazine. They did not believe me. Of course, once I got the registration, I did use it to attack government." Lack of funds also delayed the launch of *Cartoon Magazine*, as his relatives did not loan him money, thinking that cartooning was not a wise investment. Eventually, he found a lender elsewhere, whose loan he used to purchase pearls that he twice took to Bangkok and sold for a huge profit.

Initially, the magazine was irregularly published and was even suspended from 1983 to 1986, when Harun pursued a graduate degree in the United States. *Cartoon Magazine* became a monthly of thirty-two to forty pages when it was restarted in 1987, and its demise came six years later.



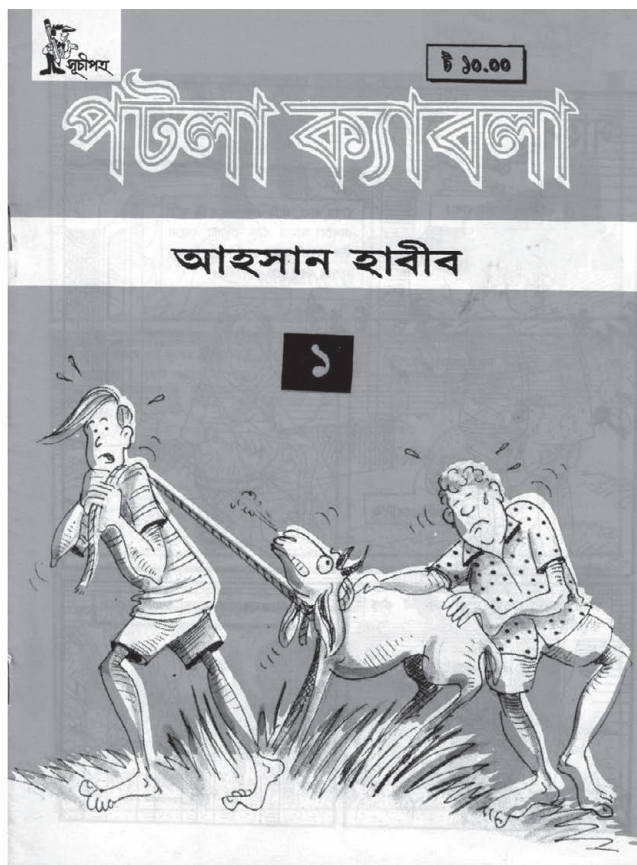


FIG. 14.8. Suchi Patra comics of the early 1990s: *Tutu Putu Kutu* (left) and *Patla Kabla*. Courtesy of Saeed Bari.

Harun sometimes risked government reprisals because of the bile directed at officials by *Cartoon Magazine*. While President Ershad was still in office, the forty-seventh issue of the magazine showed the president holding his groin while declaring his often-repeated, “Don’t worry; everything is okay” message. Harun (1993) said that he had a poster made of the cartoon, which he asked Bangladeshis to duplicate and circulate. According to Harun (1993), “[p]hotocopiers were busy all over the city and millions of copies circulated. It was a bold move. After I did this cartoon poster, I padlocked my office and hid. If Ershad could have withstood the situation another two days, I would have been in big trouble and would have had to go abroad.” The issue of December 1990, the month that Ershad was forced out of office, used a cover cartoon that showed him being thrown into a garbage can with the admonishment “Get him; beat him.” That issue was reprinted three times.

As with *Unmad’s* editor, Harun (1993) believed that he had progressed cartooning in Bangladesh, stating:

“I’ve created a market, and interest among would-be cartoonists. Before, cartoonists were individuals, separate from one another. *Cartoon* has given them an infrastructure, a base.”

Local comic books started late and did not fare well for years, primarily because investment money was in short supply for a medium thought to have an unstable market. Additionally, distributors garnered a disproportionate share of the revenues, and the competition from illegally imported Indian comic books, brought in at various points along the extensive border the two countries share, was ferocious. Harun (1993) said that Bangladeshi authorities did not crack down on imported comics because the “government is not concerned if the country is culturally invaded; it is only concerned with politics.” Distributors did not intervene, preferring Indian comics, which brought higher profits and which satisfied readers because Indian comics were laminated and in full color.

In 1989, a young Saeed Bari (1993) created what he claimed was the only comic book company in



Bangladesh, Suchi Patra. The company started ambitiously with three titles, because additional titles brought printing costs down (Bari 1993). By 1993, Suchi Patra was bringing out thirty-five monthly titles that combined funnies and adventure. Their main book was *Patla Kabla*, the adventures of two young boys, which sold three thousand copies per issue; another top seller was *Tutu Putu Kutu*, about three boy adventurers. Other titles were in the two thousand copies or below circulation range.

The formats used for Suchi Patra comics were novel—the preferred newsprint version priced at ten taka, or twenty-five cents, and the white paper version at double the price. Bari did not expect to make a profit on the first printings of the white paper comics, as production and distribution costs consumed all the income. Along with almost all entrepreneurs involved in publishing comics, he saved his harshest words for distributors, calling them gangsters or Mafia who demanded a disproportionate share of profits while providing minimum service. Suchi Patra discontinued publishing comic books because of low sales.

Comic books have received considerable attention in Bangladesh in recent years, although much of the focus is on Japanese and American imports. Both the country's first comics shop,<sup>5</sup> Jamil's Comics and Collectibles, and its inaugural comics festival, Dhaka Comicon, emphasize foreign products.

The launching of Jamil's Comics and Collectibles in September 2010 was an impulsive move on the part of its founder, AKM Alamgir Khan (better known as "Jamil bhai" by comics fans). He explained: "Around 2008, when my daughter was born, I was constantly thinking, would my child and the future generations not read comics? I had enjoyed my childhood because of this. . . . During my daughter's first birthday, I decided to open a shop. . . . I started it out of fun, when a distant relative told me that he wants to rent out a shop. I said, I will take it and ordered some comics. I told all my friends that this is a joke; after a few months of loss, I will shut it down" (Chowdhury 2013a). Khan was surprised at the enthusiasm of readers, who wanted to be



FIG. 14.9. Jamil's Comics and Collectibles store, Dhaka.

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"in touch with the global community about which they are constantly aware through the internet" (Chowdhury 2013a; see also Emil 2010). He took pride in being a "star retailer" for the U.S. company Diamond Comics. Held for the first time in December 2012, Dhaka Comicon imitated similar festivals worldwide with booths selling predominantly American and Japanese (and some Indian Bengali) comics and merchandise, stands where cartoonists sketched attendees, and fans dressing up as their favorite characters.

Although foreign oriented now, these efforts to advance comics have begun to pay dividends for those desirous of sustaining locally produced comic books. New publishers have appeared—Dhaka Comics, led by Mehedi Haque (also executive officer of *Unmad*), which planned to release four local titles of various genres in 2013; and Kalpodut, founded by cartoonist, animator, playwright, television director, and actor Tariqul Islam Shanto. Kalpodut published a children's magazine by the same name. Shanto created thirty-six comic book titles, including *Shantanu Detective Comics*, one of the publisher's most popular series. Kalpodut's fate has been in doubt since its thirty-nine-year-old owner died of cardiac arrest in early 2013 while demonstrating in a political protest. Several other companies (e.g., Dreamer Donkey, Flair, and Toonz Technologies) list publishing comic books as part of their business, but so far they seem to have produced only animation or games.

Recently, social consciousness-raising comic books, so prominent in neighboring India, have been used by government and other agencies in Bangladesh. A Plan Bangladesh unit in 2011 published a comic featuring a girl character, Laily, to teach children how to prepare for

the natural disasters so common in Bangladesh. Another series of comic books addressing a range of adolescent health and development issues, with an emphasis on reproductive health, was developed by the Bangladesh Center for Communication Programs, in conjunction with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health/Center for Communication Programs. The first comic book in the series, named the Nijeke Jano series, talked about the wet dreams of teenage boys.

### Professionalism

Common laments expressed to this author by cartoonists twenty years ago were expected to be addressed with the establishment of the Bangladesh Cartoonist Association (BANCARAS) in January 2011.

Some ongoing complaints over the years have been that editors and the public did not respect cartoonists or take their work seriously (Sayeed 1993; Islam 1993; Alam 1993; Huda 1993; Ranabi 1993; Kasem 1993); that the government and religious fundamentalists censored or otherwise threatened cartoonists (Bhattacharya 1993; Huda 1993; Alam 1993); that newspapers and magazines paid low fees for cartoons (Ranabi 1993; Huda 1993; Bhattacharya 1993; Alam 1993); that cartoonists lacked skills because of insufficient training and critique<sup>6</sup> (Harun-Or-Rashid 1993; Bhattacharya 1993, Alam 1993; Ranabi 1993; Islam 1993); that Indian and other foreign comic books made it difficult for Bangladeshi books to survive (Bari 1993); that distributors took a disproportionate share of profits (Habib 1993); and that cartoonists lacked networks and an association (Islam 1993).

BANCARAS almost immediately tackled some of these problems, especially those pertaining to professional issues. The organization provides a network for cartoonists to intermingle and work together on matters such as cartoonists' rights, copyright, syndication, the promotion of cartoons to the public as well as to publishers and editors, and the creation of an online gallery. To announce its existence and bring attention to the profession, BANCARAS in its first month held

an exhibition of cartoons by thirty-four artists (Hossain 2011). To create a market for Bangladeshi comics and to put artists' works on view, BANCARAS also organized the five-day-long Bangladesh Cartoon Fest 2012. At the inaugural ceremony, Nazrul Islam was presented with a lifetime achievement award.

In the span of a couple of years, a spark has been lit under the cartooning profession in Bangladesh with the establishment of a comics shop, Dhaka Comicon, BANCARAS, the newspaper humor supplements, and Dhaka Comics. Although it is too early to predict whether the spark will flame or fizzle out, what is clear is the need for much supporting fuel from the government and from corporate investors to start up new periodicals and engage in other ventures.

### Notes

1. Qureshi (1980, 26–27) cited the special Eid issue of the *Daily Azad* in 1944 as particularly loaded with cartoons. Published as a magazine, it featured Kasem's *Hungry Bengal and Famine Commission*, a depiction of a donkey pursuing a carrot on a stick that it will never catch up with, as well as comic drawings by Quamrul Hasan (pen name Bhimrul, "the bee").

2. In an article (Agence France-Presse 2004) reporting on the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Tokai*, Ranabi gave this version of his remembrance of Mochtar: "I found out later that that boy outside my house had died, but when I came back from Greece, I remembered him and how he used to ask me questions whenever I opened the door. His mother used to work in some of the houses nearby and he was always there, about seven years old, a little bit pot-bellied and always asking me what I was doing, what time it was, where I was going."

3. Tokai's dialogues were full of witticisms and a bit of philosophy. Harun ur Rashid (2004) provided examples:

[A]sked if he knows what a family is, the homeless Tokai reflects, "I know mine—footpath, dustbin, the crows etc." . . . Often he makes fun of the society's hypocrisy. Asked what his vow is on the children's day, a grave Tokai says, "To grow up soon." . . . Tokai's world is full of fantasies where he talks to crows, cows and other animals. . . . To the fantasy of a crow wondering what would happen if it could exchange life with Tokai, the puzzled boy answers, "What else! We would have [our] meal at this same dustbin!" . . . Often Tokai's satire is rather direct. In answer to what he prefers as a daily meal, rice or bread, Tokai says, "Nothing special! Whatever people throw away!"

4. Although Ranabi seemed to downplay the political nature of *Tokai* in 1993, he emphasized the point on the occasion of the strip's twenty-fifth anniversary in 2004, telling a reporter: "My main aim has never been to be funny but to say something meaningful for our society. Tokai has something to say about everything and he always criticizes all parties and all politicians" (Agence France-Presse 2004).

5. In the early 1990s, Harun established Cartoon Products, a shop that sold stationery, posters, postcards, calendars, and other paper gift products, using U.S., Bangladeshi, and other Asian characters (often without permission). Harun emphasized foreign cartoons because that was where the demand was, but by 1993 he featured Bangladeshi cartoonists' works on the merchandise. Cartoon Products did not sell comic books, only *Cartoon Magazine* (Harun 1993).

6. Cartooning was part of the instruction in Khondokar Abu Sayeed's in-home art school, which he started in 1988. Assisted by his artist wife, Gemy, Sayeed taught thirty to forty students per session, sketching, painting, cartooning, strip cartooning, and clay sculpting (Sayeed 1993).

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# বাতুলদেব

নারায়ণ দেবনাথ





Comic art was integral to Indian culture for hundreds of years (see the introduction), but what was later to evolve into contemporary humor magazines, and then comic strips and comic books, appeared only after the British had occupied the subcontinent.

### Humor Magazines, Comic Strips, and Syndicates

Probably earlier than any other Asian country, India published a cartoon magazine, the *Delhi Sketch Book*, which lasted from 1850 to 1857. In its inaugural issue, the magazine proposed to be “simply a vehicle for drawings and caricatures,” humbly (or mockingly?) stating that it was not “arrogant enough” to imitate London’s *Punch*, itself relatively young at the time. The *Sketch Book* was relatively tame, holding back from printing “obnoxious” drawings that criticized the political, religious, or social beliefs of India (Chattopadhyay 1992).

Before the end of the nineteenth century, nearly a dozen other humor/cartoon magazines sprouted throughout India. *Indian Punch* appeared in 1859, and the clandestinely edited and written Calcutta fortnightly *Indian Charivari* in 1872 (lasting until 1880). The secrecy of *Charivari* may have been necessary because of the magazine’s overt racism. In the 1870s and 1880s, those humor periodicals that appeared were not very imaginative in naming themselves: *Parsee Punch* and *Hindi Punch* (Bombay), *Oudh Punch* (Lucknow, 1877–1881?), *Delhi Punch*, *Punjabi Punch*, *Urdu Punch*, *Gujarati Punch*, and *Puneath Punch* (the latter published in a remote Bengali town). An exception, and the most renowned of the lot, was *Basantak* (Calcutta, 1874–1876) (Mitter 1997, 17–19), edited by Prannath Dutta, whose nephew did the satirical drawings in the style of the earlier Kalighat prints (see the introduction). *Hindi Punch* outlived all of these cartoon magazines, lasting from 1878 to 1930.

By the early twentieth century, other humor/cartoon magazines were started up, or at least attempted, as political cartooning began to find a place in Indian journalism. The Tamil poet and weekly newspaper editor

### Chapter 15

# India

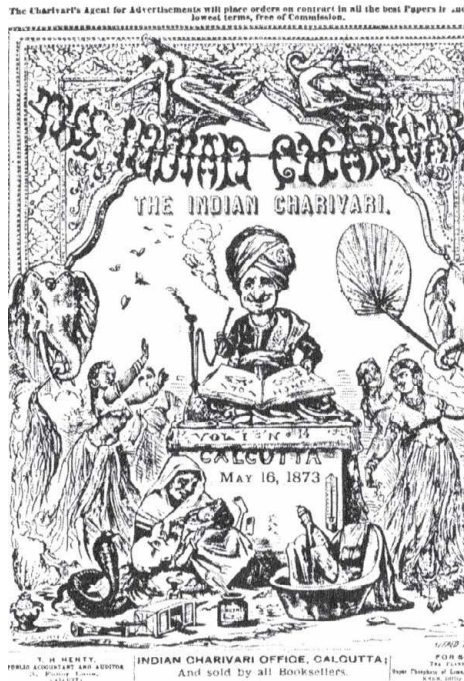


FIG. 15.1. The *Indian Charivari*. Calcutta. May 16, 1873.

C. Subramania Bharati tried to start *Chitravali* in 1910 as a monthly, designed to carry only political cartoons (in English and Tamil), but he was stopped because of British press restrictions. However, others came out later, such as Kerala's short-lived *Viswadeepam* (1939, in Calicut), followed over the next decade by *Rasi* (in Alleppey), *Sarasam* (in Changanacherry), and *Narmada* (in Kottayam) (Varghese 1992). Bal Thackeray, staunch Hindu nationalist, fulltime right-wing politician, and founder of the Shiv Sena Party, started the weekly *Marmik* in 1960.

India's most famous satirical magazine, *Shankar's Weekly*, came out in 1948, begun by K. Shankar Pillai, whose cartooning career dated back to 1932. The magazine's main purpose was to make people laugh (Malhotra 1990), although *Shankar's Weekly* also launched the careers of many famous cartoonists. Pillai closed his magazine in 1975 (Bhogwekar 1990; see also see Lal 1987). Another magazine that published humor and cartoons for years was *Ananda Vikatan* (Happy jester), started in Madras in 1926. The British *Punch* inspired Tamil movie mogul S. S. Vasan to initiate the weekly (Madhan 1993),<sup>1</sup> which, over the years, did much to train and provide an outlet for top Tamil cartoonists. Today, *Ananda Vikatan* features beautiful girls rather

than cartoons on its cover, and it deals more with gender issues.

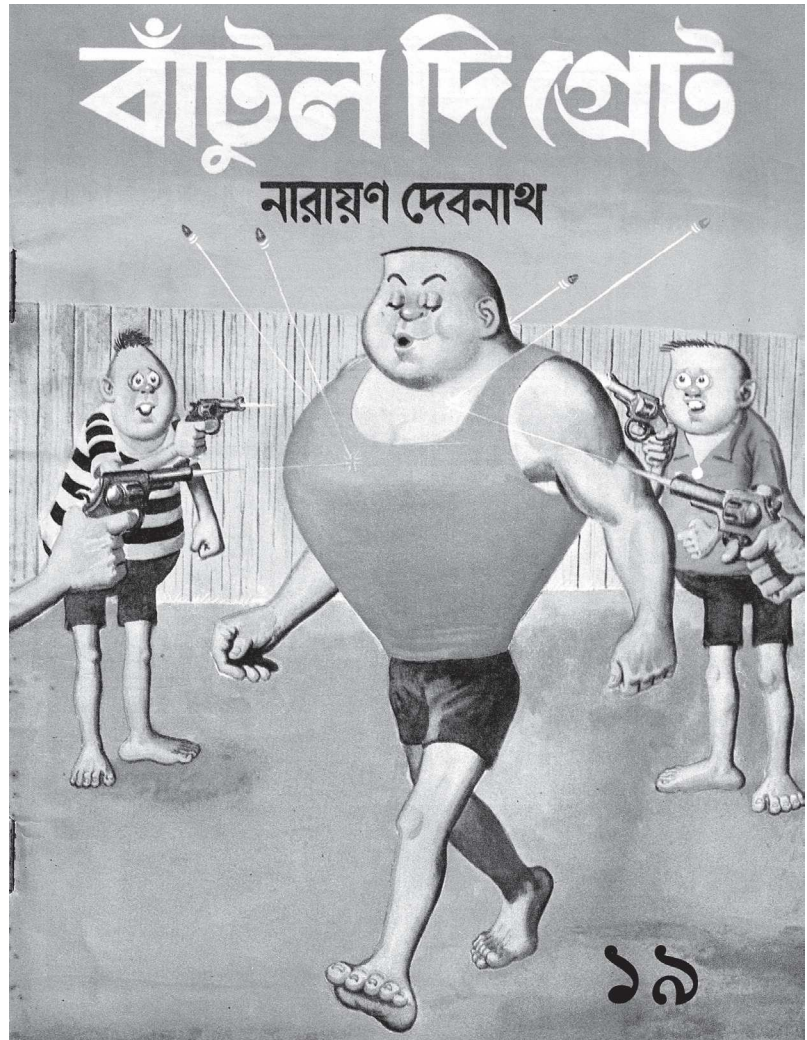
Humor/cartoon magazines of recent years have faced a precarious existence, such as *Wisecrack*, published by Ramesh Ramchandani for only twelve issues; Prakash Shetty's monthly *Vaarekore*, started in 2009; and a small cartoon published monthly by the Kerala Cartoon Academy. *Toms Magazine*, self-published twice monthly by the cartoonist Toms (V. T. Thomas), is one of the few that thrives (Gopalakrishnan 2009c).

The beginning of the comic strip in India has yet to be pinpointed, partly because of problems associated with nomenclature,<sup>2</sup> India's multiplicity of languages, and the different versions of comics history given by those who were involved. It is likely that the multipanel strip had its origins in the humor magazines and the work of newspaper political cartoonists, who added pocket cartoons and strips to their workloads.

There were strips as early as the 1930s. One, by P. C. Lahiri in the Bengali daily *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, claimed to be the first syndicated; it was followed shortly afterward by a strip by Anwar Ahmed in the *Hindustan Times*. The 1960s and 1970s seemed to be a breeding time for comic strips, as cartoonists such as Narayan Debnath, Pran Kumar Sharma, G. Aravindan, Toms, Yesudasan (Chackalethu John Yesudass), M. Mohandas, Abid Surti, Jagjit Uppal, Mario Miranda, Madhan, and others popularized characters in strips or one-panel humor cartoons. The categories of the pioneering strips were identified by O. P. Joshi (1986, 217) as: (1) "small compact strips based on an incident," an example of which was *Chandu* by Ahmed, dealing with political events; (2) "continuous series in dailies"; and (3) "large strips based on a theme," exemplified by *Musibat Hai*, about the problems of a middle-class office worker.

In 1962, Bengali cartoonist Narayan Debnath was requested by the children's magazine *Shuktara* to start a regular comic strip, much to his bafflement. He created two Laurel and Hardy-type characters, Handa and Bhonda, whose exploits took up two pages of the magazine. Debnath followed up with other strips such as *Shukti-Mutki*, about "skinny and fatty girls"; *Bantul*





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FIG. 15.2. The first Bengali superhero in comic book format, *Bantul the Great*. Narayan Debnath. No. 19, n.d.

*the Great* (1963) in color, Bantul generally considered the most important Bengali cartoon character; and others including *Patalchand the Magician*, *Bahadur Beral*, *Danpite Khadu Ar Tar Chemical Dadu*, *Black Diamond Indrajit Roy*, *Petuk Master Batuklal*, and *Nonte-Phonte* (Deb 2007). At the suggestion of his publisher and editor, Debnath made Bantul the first Bengali superhero, giving him invincible and unimaginable powers and thus providing a model of strength for Bengalis during the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War (Chakravorty 2012).

Pran Kumar Sharma broke the stranglehold of strips by India's English-language dailies in 1960 when he created the teenager Dabu and his mentor Professor Adhikari. Published in the *Children's Sunday Magazine*, the strip was also picked up by two periodicals in Karnataka and printed in the Kannada language. Pran

(1993) said that, in the beginning, "[i]t was tough for me as foreign comic strips were cheaper and syndicated. American characters were popular all over the world. One thing that helped me was that my themes were local, such as Indian festivals and Indian customs. Indians thought these strips were something of their own. My themes gave me some advantage. Bit by bit, I got a part of the market." Pran quickly added other strips to his oeuvre, the most popular being *Chacha Chaudhary* (1970), about a wise old man whose "strength comes from brain, not brawn" (Pran 2006). *Chacha Chaudhary* has had phenomenal success, converted into comic books and a television series of more than six hundred episodes. Some of Pran's other strips including *Pinki* (about a naughty five-year-old girl), *Shrimatiiji* (Mrs. Housewife, 1968), and *Biloo* (about a boy who is an avid cricket fan) have also been popular.

India

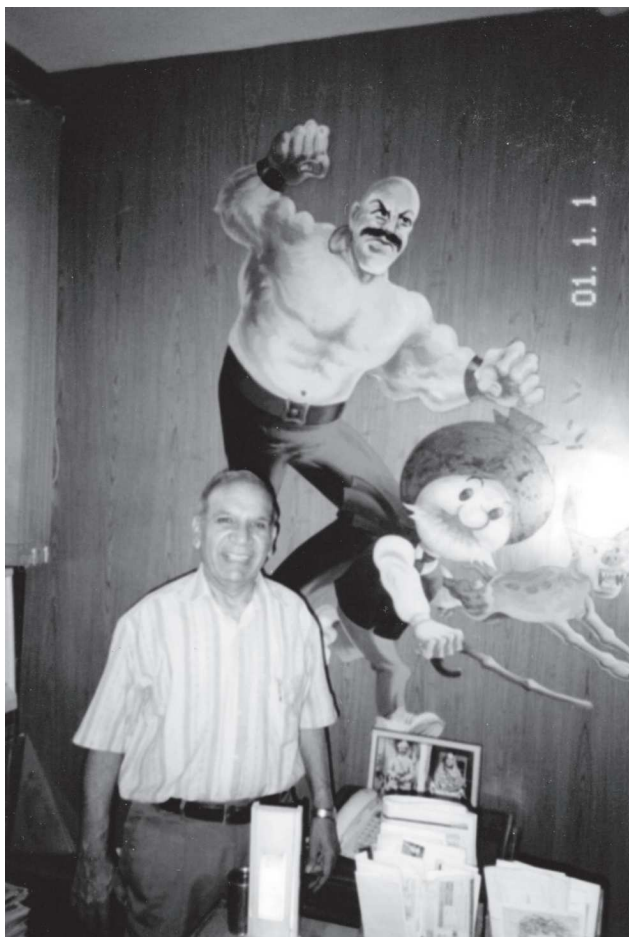


FIG. 15.3. Pran Kumar Sharma with his characters Jupiter and Chacha Chaudhary in the background. New Delhi, July 10, 2009. Photo by John A. Lent.

Pran traces his motivation to become a cartoonist to India's Partition in 1947, when his family escaped from Pakistan to India, experiencing unimaginable savagery on both sides of the border. Pran (2009) remembered seeing Muslims killing Hindus and Sikhs and burning their houses in Pakistan before he and his family were evacuated in cramped trucks to India. There, he expected the "nightmare" to end, but "[i]t was not over. Hindus were killing Muslims. There were bodies of Muslims lying on both sides of the tracks. This affected a nine-year-old boy like me. From that day on, I thought when I grow up, I will try to put a smile on the face of man. I became a cartoonist at the age of nine." In a number of his strips, Pran inserts messages of harmony, hard work, antiterrorism, and other themes, his strategy being to "make people laugh and while their mouths are open, put in a message" (Pran 2009).



FIG. 15.4. *Cheriya Manushyarum, Valiya Lokavum* (Small men and the big world). G. Aravindan's thought-provoking strip published in Kerala, 1961–1973.

G. Aravindan's comic strip *Cheriya Manushyarum, Valiya Lokavum* (Small men and the big world) lasted from 1961 to 1973 in the weekly publication *Mathrubhumi Azhchappathippu*; it was unceremoniously replaced by another strip when the artist was out for three weeks because of illness. The strip was not always publicly accepted, mainly because it used a "thought provoking, understated, subtle kind of humor" (Gopalakrishnan 2009a, 44) at a time when audiences expected laugh gags. *Cheriya Manushyarum, Valiya Lokavum* revolved around a character representative of the middle-class Malayali. The first collected edition of Aravindan's strips was described by one veteran Indian cartoonist as not only the country's first graphic novel but the "first time the Malayali reader sensed time in a cartoon strip" (E. P. Unny, quoted in Gopalakrishnan 2009a, 46).

An earlier strip by Toms, in 1957, related the antics of Boban and Molly, characters he modeled after real-life neighboring twins who used to short-cut through his



yard on their way to school. *Bobanum and Mollyum* was a popular feature of the daily *Malayala Manorama*. In 1983, Toms published a book about his characters and a few years later was sued by *Malayala Manorama* for copyright violation. After many legal intricacies, he finally won the case and started Toms Publications, which will be discussed below. Yesudasan, a fellow Keralan, was primarily a political cartoonist although, like some of his colleagues, he was also connected to humor magazines and drew strips. For twelve years around the 1970s, he published *Asadhu* (Invalid vote), and then he edited *Cut-Cut* and *Tuk-Tuk*, all humor magazines. He prided himself for placing female characters such as Ponnamma and Mrs. Nair, appearing in *Malayalam Manorama* and *Vanitha*, respectively, in central roles. He said that both became “household names in Kerala” (Yesudasan 1993).

Comic book pioneer Anant Pai was responsible for giving M. Mohandas his entry into comics when in the 1970s he asked him to illustrate a weekly comic strip, *Ramu and Shyamu*. Two weeks later, Mohandas was given the task to draw a monthly strip about a monkey named Kapish, which ended up lasting for three hundred episodes, published in several English-language dailies and children’s magazines until 1985 (*New Indian Express* 2005). Both strips were conceived and scripted by Pai and distributed through his Rang Rekha syndicate. Mohandas’s other contributions consisted of the elf characters Mayaavi and Luttaffi; *Daakini Ammooma*, modeled after a granny in his neighborhood; and *Kayamkulam Kochunni*, created with the legendary actor Sathyan in mind.

Pai was also involved in the initial stages of the careers of Abid Surti and Jagjit Uppal, through the comic book series Amar Chitra Katha or through the Rang Rekha syndicate. Surti, a famous painter, writer, and dramatist, began drawing cartoons as a teenager in the mid-1950s solely to make “pocket money,” but he continued doing strips long enough to make an impact. In 1965, he started the twenty-eight-year run of the popular three-panel *Dabbuju* in the Hindi daily *Dharm-yug*, and in the following decade he helped found Rang

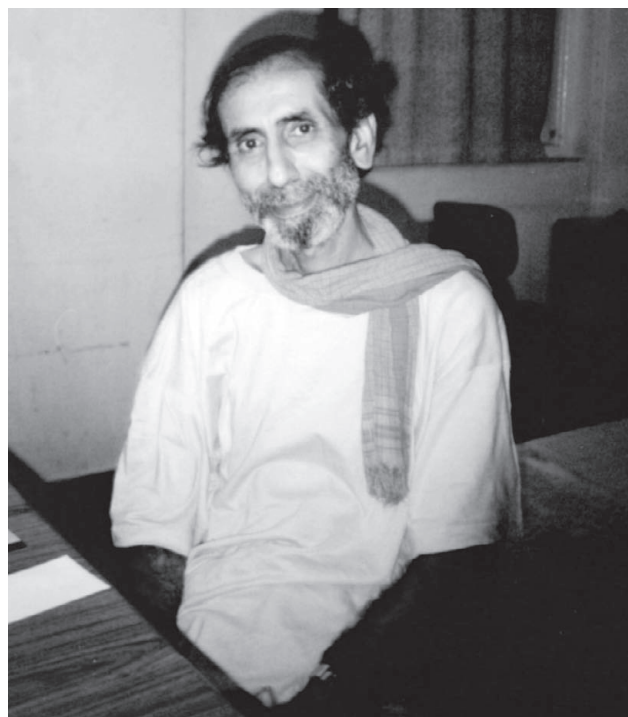


FIG. 15.5. Abid Surti. Bombay, July 10, 1993. Photo by John A. Lent.

Rekha Features and the strips *Lukhudi* (about a monkey who behaved like a human), *Inspector Azad*, the jungle-themed *Shuju*, and *Inspector Vikram* (later *Secret-Agent Vikram*). Surti (1993) said that *Shuju* succeeded to the extent that some newspapers dropped *Tarzan* and *The Phantom*, strips that *Shuju* imitated, for the local strip. After joining the *Times of India* in 1976 or 1977, he created *Bahadur*, a criminal turned criminal hunter, as part of a campaign to get villagers to defend themselves against marauding thieves (Surti 1993; 1995).

Uppal, who later became a highly-paid astrologer, was hired by Pai in the mid-1970s to replace Surti on the strips *Secret-Agent Vikram* and *Bahadur* and to work on others such as *Inspector Garud* and the love strips *Mastani* and *Baji Rao*. Uppal (1995) said that he changed parts of the strips that Surti had started; for example, he added different current topics such as dowries, ecology, and wayward children to *Bahadur*.

The types of cartoons Mario Miranda did for more than half a century were related to strips in that they featured a host of regular characters going about their daily routines, in the process pointing out foibles of Indian society. The difference was that the funny characters occupied only one panel. Miranda’s most popular character was the sexy Miss Fonseca, described as “vibrant



and dumb, yearning and fatuous, disdainful and normal, eccentric and matter-of-fact” and at times “unwittingly . . . hilarious” (Miranda 1980, introduction). Madhan’s drawings in *Ananda Vikatan*, beginning in 1973, also were one-panel humor cartoons that featured four main characters—the mischievous boy Rangudu, the likeable thief Singaravelan, the extremely careful office worker Muthanna, and the realty agent Punyakodi. Madhan discontinued the strip in 1981.

The highly literate state of Kerala in the south has been known for its abundance of cartoonists and comic strips. Besides Toms and Aravindan, other Keralan comic strip artists in the latter half of the twentieth century include K. S. Rajan, with his creation about two children, *Laloo Leela*, in *Manorajyam Weekly*; Raju Nair, who did *Captain John William* (an adventure strip about pirates), *Kalyaniyum Kochamayum* (tales about a maid and her mistress), *Marvelinadu* (about a legendary just and hospitable king of Kerala), and *Neighbors*; Gopi Krishnan, who maintains a half-page cartoon section in *Mathrubhumi*; K. Sreedharan Pillai; Abu Abraham; and Raghavan Nair (Nair 1993a; 1993b).

Some of the top political cartoonists working outside Kerala have also drawn newspaper strips, including E. P. Unny, Ajit Ninan, Sudhir Tailang, Ravi Shankar (no relation to the internationally celebrated sitar player), and Manjula Padmanabhan. Ninan started his career in 1981 with the strip *Detective Moochhwalu and Dog Pooch*, placing the dog in the more intelligent role; Tailang did a full-page strip, *Jadugar Jim*, in *Children’s World*; Shankar created *Ratland Chronicle* and *The Little Family* in *Indian Express*; and Padmanabhan, the only woman in the group, created the character Suki,<sup>3</sup> a working woman on her own, which appealed to the Western-oriented sophisticate but was not easily identifiable in India (S. Bhattacharya 1996; Kothandaraman 1989, 169; Unny, 1993, 2009; Ninan 2009; Tailang, 1993, 2009; Shankar, 1993).

With India’s more pronounced presence on the global economic scene, business strips began to appear in the 1990s and 2000s, among them *Doubtsourcing*, an online cartoon set in an Indian office and aimed at

the outsourcing industry, in which the country plays a leading role; and Priya Raj’s works, described as India’s answer to Scott Adams’s *Dilbert* (P. Bhattacharya 2008).

The English-language press, for which the above cartoonists have worked, has not favored locally created strips. Looking at twelve English-language newspapers published on July 15, 2009, this author found that of about a total thirty strips used, none were locally drawn or locally oriented. A study in 1995 reported by Padmanabhan (1995) found that of the thirty-six strips in New Delhi’s leading six dailies, three were drawn by Indians.

Another rich source of comic strips has been children’s magazines, which have existed in India since the late 1910s with *Ghuncha* (The bud) in Urdu, *Phool* (The flower) of Lahore, and *Payam-e-Taleem* (New Delhi). These and others brought out by the British either folded or were fading by independence (1947), supplanted by children’s periodicals published by newspaper groups or government agencies (Mahmood 1976, 179). Standing out in longevity and popularity is *Chandamama*, based in Madras and started by movie mogul B. Nagi Reddy and Aluri Chakrapani. The magazine went through a trying time in 1998 when a labor strike forced it to close for a year and the Reddy family lost ownership control. However, *Chandamama* recently bounced back, more than doubling sales from 160,000 per issue in 2006 to more than 360,000 in 2008 and moving into comic book publication and animation production, drawing on its rich trove of twenty-five copyrighted characters and sixteen thousand stories.

Some of India’s comic strips and children’s funny pages in newspapers were generated by comics/features syndicates such as Rang Rekha Features, Amrita Bharati, Pran’s Features, and Indian Features. Rang Rekha was started by Anant Pai (and perhaps others) in 1969. By 1993, the syndicate had sixty to seventy newspaper subscribers for its strips and features, sent out in eleven languages. The multipanel strips were themed around humor and adventure; the syndicate’s one-panel strips dealt with education, medicine, science, and technology. Pai (1993) said that Rang Rekha was the first “organized” syndicate, as opposed to an earlier 1952 syndicate that

handled only one strip drawn by Enver Ahmad. “The syndicate is not a worthwhile activity financially,” Pai (1993) said, jesting that “I continue it to keep four people employed and it gives my wife something to do at home, so she will not bother me.”

Amrita Bharati, started in 1989, distributed six humor strips in its first years, one by the syndicate’s director, Subba Rao, called *Bahu Roopi* about a multifaceted person placed in different roles (teacher, jailbird, etc.), and five others all scripted by editor Luis Fernandes, who said that he got his ideas from freelancers. By the 1990s, the syndicate was providing strips and pictorials to twenty-four newspapers in nine languages. Strips were priced according to a newspaper’s circulation (Fernandes 1993). Subba Rao (1993) said that the syndicate’s first strip was *All in the Family*, five to six panels about the domestic misadventures of an Indian couple and their son, done by Luis [Fernandes?] and V. B. Halbe.

The syndicate that Pran started in 1960 was initially intended to distribute and promote his own strips. The entire operation functions out of the top floor of Pran’s three-story house in New Delhi, where two assistants put in the dialogue and color the strips that Pran conceptualizes, writes, and draws. Pran does one strip of eight to ten panels each week, which is sent to thirty to thirty-five weekly newspaper editions nationally. He alternates titles so that in a given period of time *Chacha Chaudhary*, *Billo*, *Pinki*, *Shrimatiji*, and the others appear. Afterward, he compiles episodes of titles to be published as comic books by Diamond or made into television series by Sahara One (Pran 2009).

Others besides Pai and Pran have laid claim to being the initiators of the comic strip syndicate in India, including P. K. S. Kutty, who wrote to this author: “Incidentally I was the first cartoonist in India to syndicate my cartoons. From 1962 I had this syndicate for a long time until all my clients had their own cartoonists” (1995).

Comic strips face difficult times in India, especially in the English press. A number of contributing factors have been identified. Some given by Subba Rao in 1993 are still very much evident today, such as problems of translating strips into various Indian languages to

reach a wider audience; ensuring that the customs, backgrounds, and characters’ dress reflected in strips are genuinely those of India, whether nationally or regionally; and finding multitalented people who can both write and draw, thus reducing the need for a bloated payroll.

More recently, other cartoonists have expressed their dissatisfaction with the state of strip cartooning in India. Gokul Gopalakrishnan (2009c) said that editors of the newspapers to which he contributed strips do not want them any longer because of a lack of space; Ajit Ninan (2009) attributed the shortage of strips to limited markets because of the country’s highly heterogeneous makeup and editors’ insistence upon exclusive rights; and E. P. Unny (2009) said that political cartoonists are too busy to sustain a strip. Rajinder Puri (2009), who in 1986–1987 drew the strip *Newshound* about a reporter dog who interacts with political events, said that the fault lies with Indians’ adoration of American culture, including its comic strips, a point also made by Pran (2009), who said: “Indians think everything coming from abroad is better than that of India.” Pran added the concern that others have with the envelopment of Indian cartooning by American syndicates, a growing problem whereby the American syndicates are able to provide English-language dailies with units of U.S. strips, puzzles, and horoscopes in boilerplate format, in package deals that are less costly than paying Indians to draw strips. Padmanabhan (1995) also mentioned the relative affordability of foreign strips as a major incentive to favor them, but she spelled out other difficulties, such as: (1) whereas editorial cartoonists can expect a lifetime commitment to one newspaper, strip artists are dispensable freelancers; (2) Indian strips, including hers, are less polished and professional than those of their foreign competitors; (3) opportunities for Indian strips to be syndicated are extremely rare; (4) “There aren’t many graphic symbols which are instantly recognised across the social and economic rifts in our country”; and (5) Not much care is taken in how strips are used in newspapers, often “garishly coloured by amateurs or squeezed out of proportion to fit into a particular space

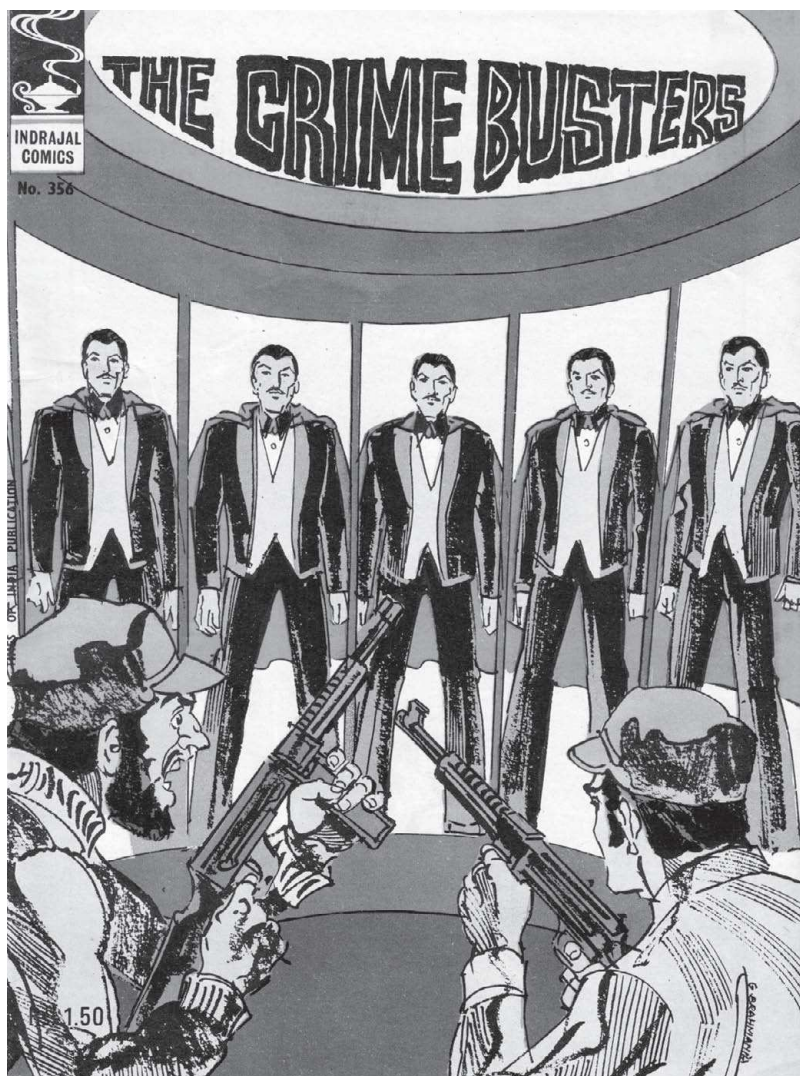


FIG. 15.6. *The Crime Busters*, published by Indrajal Comics. No. 156, August 15, 1980.

slot” (S. Bhattacharya 1996). Padmanabhan, along with Ravi Shankar, perhaps oversimplified the problem by claiming that it resulted from the humorlessness of the country. According to Padmanabhan, “we are a humourless people; we do have our widely circulated jokes about certain communities; but set it down visually and there will be a big furore, because in print we must always appear to be a harmonious people.”

### Comic Books: The Beginnings

The comic books Indians read before the 1970s were imports from the United States and Great Britain, some left behind by Allied forces at the end of World War II. It was not until the relatively late period of the 1960s

that Indian-produced comic books appeared, and even the first of these was not truly Indian but rather a series based on Lee Falk’s *The Phantom*, enclosed by an Indrajal Comics cover and published by the *Times of India*.

After Indianization of comic books began in the late 1960s, especially with the Amar Chitra Katha series, an industry was in the making. Companies publishing comic books in the myriad Indian languages mushroomed throughout the country, but the major ones were located in New Delhi and Bombay, namely Indrajal, Amar Chitra Katha, Diamond, and Raj.

### Indrajal Comics

Originally, Indrajal Comics was solely meant to be the dwelling place of the American comic strip *The Phantom*.



It started in the early 1960s when Anant Pai, newly hired by the *Times of India*, suggested to his supervisor that the newspaper use its press's downtime to print comic books. To determine what comics they should publish, Pai conducted a survey of one hundred children, the majority of whom chose the Phantom as their favorite character. When the first issue of the Indrajal Comics series appeared in March 1963, sixteen of the thirty-two pages were *Phantom* strips; the rest of the issue was devoted to science and other educational topics such as *Guru Club* and *What to Do*, satisfying Pai's lifetime passion to use the comics as a medium to instruct. Also, he said that he wanted Indrajal to appeal to teachers and to "break the bias against comics" (Pai 1993).

On December 1, 1976, Indrajal published its first locally based title, *Bahadur* (The courageous one), about a vigilante along the lines of the Phantom or Mandrake the Magician. Dressed in an ensemble of Western and traditional garb (blue jeans and a saffron kurta), Bahadur initially sets out to avenge the death of his bandit father, who was killed by the police. He is won over by the same policeman who had slain his father and decides to aid the cause of justice. Abid Surti created *Bahadur* to compete with *The Phantom* and give Indians a heroic character with whom they could identify. He fashioned the character to be a "typical Indian looking like a Rajasthanian person, known for their bravery" (Surti 1993). When Surti left the *Times of India* because of differences with management, *Bahadur* was written and drawn by others, including Jagjit Uppal, who, with his wife Kamini, created another Indrajal character, Dara, the Prince of Spies. Dara, an underemployed playboy working for a secret service, never attained Bahadur's popularity; another new character, the yogic superhero Aditya, similarly fell short of the mark (A. Rao 2001, 47–54).

The Indrajal Comics series was particularly popular in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In 1978, monthly sales were 200,000; in 1981, this monthly figure jumped to 580,000 for Indrajal's fortnightly releases of *Bahadur*, *The Phantom*, and *Garth*. When Indrajal titles converted to weeklies, also in 1981, total monthly sales shot up to

one million (Singh 1982, 84). The boom was short lived, however, and in 1990 Indrajal closed. The reasons for its demise range widely, including the loss of national appeal, resulting in withdrawal from publication in a number of Indian languages; competition from television and video as well as small publishers with less expensive adventure comics; and internal conflict within management (A. Rao 2001, 53–54). In December 2011, Surti announced that he was reviving the character Bahadur for a scheduled movie.

### Amar Chitra Katha

Whenever Indian comic books are mentioned, invariably the discussion starts and ends with Amar Chitra Katha (Immortal picture stories), a series of 436 titles (plus hundreds of reprints) started in 1967 by Anant Pai. Concentrating on Indian history, mythology, classics, and folklore, Amar Chitra Katha was *the* success story of subcontinent comics in the 1970s and 1980s, selling more than seventy-nine million copies, garnering the attention of leading Indians (including Prime Ministers Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi), and setting a template for imitators such as Adarsh Chitra Katha and Gaurav Gatha (Bhade 1993, 39). The books were translated into thirty-eight languages (including some of those of India), and some titles had multiple printings, the prime example being *Krishna*, which by 1993 alone had been reprinted more than forty-two times (Pai 1993).

After a slow start, Amar Chitra Katha sales picked up as Pai put his shrewd publicity and marketing skills to work. He personally took copies to restaurants, shops, and petrol stations to be displayed; organized hundreds of quiz competitions, fancy dress contests, and debates all over India; created more than four hundred Amar Chitra Katha clubs; and orchestrated star-studded title launchings, seminars, and other events. By the late 1970s, his persistence had paid off as sales soared to six hundred thousand to seven hundred thousand copies monthly and the frequency of issue narrowed from every three months to twice or thrice monthly (Parekh 1991, 17).



FIG. 15.7. Anant Pai in his Bombay office, July 8, 1993.  
Photo by John A. Lent.

Pai, educated in chemical engineering, drifted into comics by way of employment at Bombay and New Delhi publishers, particularly the Times of India Group, where, as described above, he started Indrajal Comics. He said that three isolated incidents spurred him to create Amar Chitra Katha:

I'm a little emotional. I saw a television quiz show in 1967 where Saint Stephen College students could not answer questions on Indian mythology and history. I thought something is wrong; these children are alienated from their culture. When I saw that quiz show, it was a turning point. These youngsters educated in English schools were not aware of their roots, were alienated from their roots.

Then I came to Bombay. During a lockout at *Times of India*, when I was off work, I encouraged my nephews and nieces to bring out a magazine, which they called *Family News*. Their stories were set in Warrington [England] where a character named Robert yearned to go to London. This shocked me.

The third incident was when we went to Elephanta for a picnic in a mechanized boat. A child of four in the boat asked if it was an imported boat, the implication being good things could come only from the West. I thought our children should respect their own culture. (Pai 1993)

After unsuccessfully approaching a "half dozen" publishers, Pai talked H. G. Mirchandani of India Book House (IBH) into trying out the series. Initially, Mirchandani paid Pai a paltry five hundred rupees per book (Pai 1993), although later he admitted that without

Pai, whom he called a "fountainhead of inspiration," and Amar Chitra Katha, IBH would not have become as well known as it did (Mirchandani 1993).

The first ten Amar Chitra Katha titles were primarily Western stories of the *Classics Illustrated* mold. The eleventh title was *Krishna*, the most successful of the series, followed by more mythological works and later by books on history, folklore, and regional heroes and heroines. Scattered among the latter are books on non-Indian people and events (e.g., Albert Einstein, the French Revolution, Jesus Christ, and the Curies).

IBH abandoned publishing new titles in 1991 when total monthly sales plummeted to thirty thousand or fewer copies, instead issuing select titles of Amar Chitra Katha books in deluxe editions. Pai (1993) singled out increased television and video viewing by children as the culprit, but, as always, other reasons for the drop in sales lurked in the background such as internal conflict brought on by Pai's refusal to share credit for the books' success (S. Rao 1995) and his mammoth workload that required him to spread himself very thin. Over the years, Pai assumed increasing responsibilities as he established the fortnightly children's magazine *Tinkle* in 1980, operated Rang Rekha Features, ran his Partha Institute of Personality Development and edited its monthly magazine, wrote a series of how-to books, and much more.

As indicated above, Amar Chitra Katha continued to exist, for the most part reprinting its various series, which by 2004 were catalogued into 243 categories, the largest being mythology with sixty-three titles. Some new titles have been published, one example of which

is *Kalpana Chawla* (2005), about the Indian American astronaut who perished in the 2003 space shuttle Columbia accident. Diamond Comics, for a time in the 1990s, published and distributed Amar Chitra Katha titles (M. Rai 1995; G. Rai 1995).

In 2007, Amar Chitra Katha was acquired by ACK Media, chaired by its founder, Samir Patil. The new owner initiated a marketing campaign that rocketed Amar Chitra Katha sales upward by 40 percent in 2008 and 80 percent in the first quarter of 2009, by which time three million copies were being sold yearly in English and more than twenty other languages. The forward-looking ACK Media also published the first Amar Chitra Katha books about living people and moved into animation and digital versions of various titles, while not overhauling the original history and mythology titles (Bajaj 2009). As examples of books on contemporary people, ACK Media published graphic novels in 2012 on the famous vocalist M. S. Subbulakshmi and the mathematician Srinivasa Ramanujan.

The accuracy and representativeness of some of the original Amar Chitra Katha stories have been debated over the years, despite Pai's extensive knowledge and research of history, languages, and classics. Controversy has swirled around Amar Chitra Katha's portrayal of women (see A. Rao 1999; Lent 2004; Jamuna 2010), caste and religion (K. Kumar 1983; Suraiya 1984; Narayan 1993; Bakshi 1983; Baria 1992; A. Rao 2001; Pritchett 1995; Lent 2004), and overall historical accuracy (Sastry n.d.; McLain 2005, 2007, 2008; Desai 2003; Sarita G. 2010; A. Rao 1996). Whenever Pai was attacked, he rebutted that he depicted past events through the biases prevalent at those times and that he depended on reliable sources.

#### Diamond Comics

Diamond Comics came about when brothers Narendra Kumar and Gulshan Rai decided to break away from their family's business, Star Publications, in the 1970s. They wanted to do something different—publish comic books—which did not meet with their parents' approval.

Upon splitting from Star, the brothers decided to publish original Indian comic books, starting with four titles—*Lambu Motu*, *Tauji*, *Rajan Iqbal*, and *Falandisingh*. Rai, who was managing director,<sup>4</sup> takes credit for creating these books and, more broadly and inaccurately, all Indian comics. He said:

We began to publish four comics; all four written by me. I generated Indian comics. There were no comic books until I started with these four. They were not successful. They were in black and white, not color. I did the books in black and white, because I wanted to do them at low cost so everyone could enjoy them. Then I did the comics in color and they sold. Forty-eight pages for five rupees. Each of the four books had a different profile. There was a boom when I brought English comic books in the market. After the success of these four, I introduced more characters. (G. Rai 2009)

In the first two years of the business, the brothers lost six hundred thousand rupees, but their fortunes changed after the comics were printed in color, new characters were added (totaling sixteen by 1984), and Diamond teamed up with Pran, publishing his *Chacha Chaudhary* as a comic book, beginning in 1980. A large part of the success must be attributed to the deep understanding of the market that Rai, Kumar, and Kumar's son Maneesh developed. Maneesh Rai (1995) said that once or twice a week, for five or six hours, they went to the local bookshop to see what was selling.

When the Diamond Group of Publications released its media profile in 1995, the company boasted of publishing comic books in six languages, featuring twenty fictional characters, the most popular by far being Chacha Chaudhary. By that time, Diamond had also acquired the publishing and/or distribution rights to Indrajal's *The Phantom*, *Mandrake the Magician*, and others; Amar Chitra Katha's *Spider-Man*; and Pran's augmented lineup of characters. Diamond also published magazines, novels, pocket books, children's books, and specialized books (Diamond Group of Publications 1995).



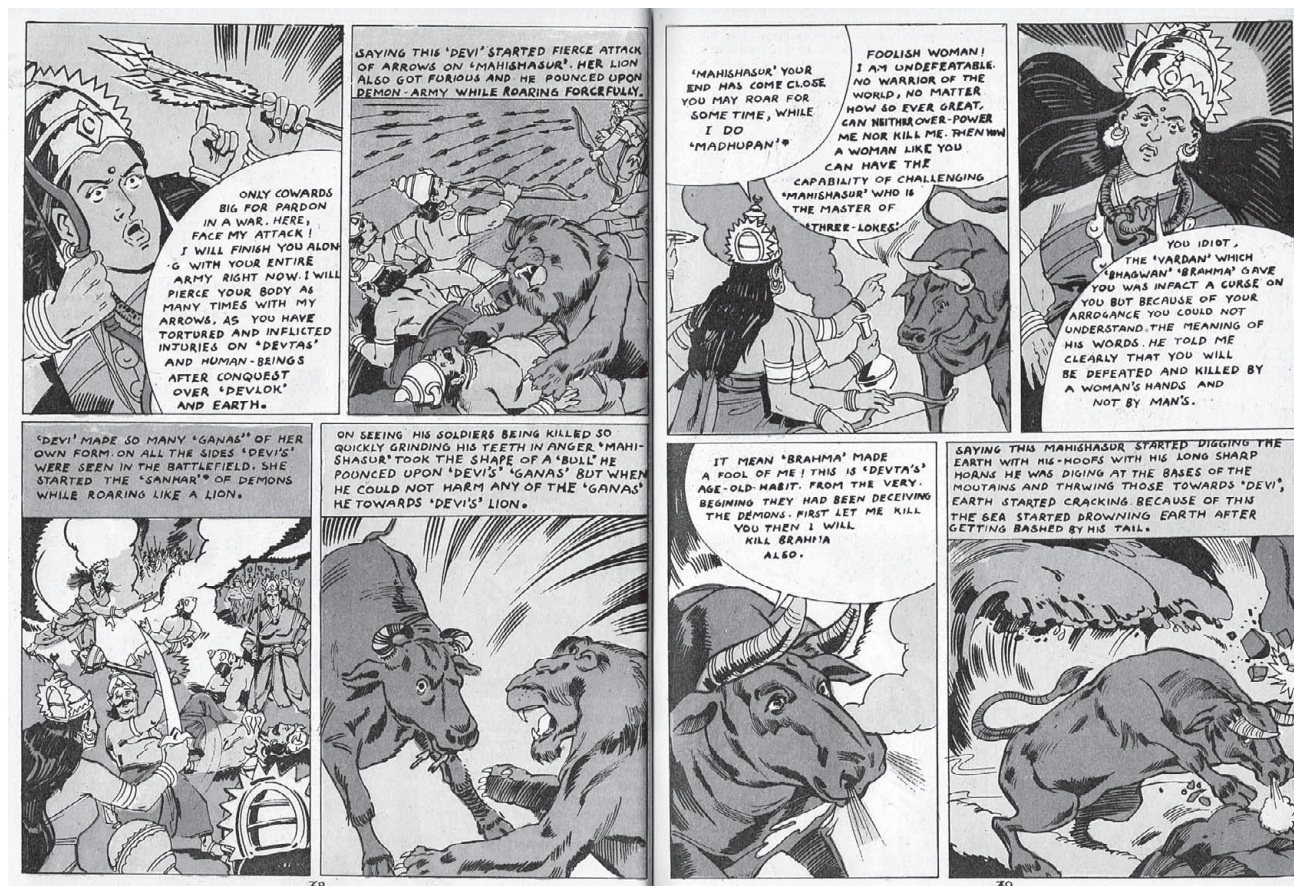


FIG. 15.8. Inside page of Diamond Comics Digest's *Durga Mahima*. Courtesy of Gulshan Rai. Notice the extensive use of dialogue.

The secret to Diamond's success rests with the principles of getting more for less and focusing on the bottom line. Both Kumar (quoted in Gupta 1993) and Rai (2009) have emphasized that they give readers more pages per book at a lower cost than that of competitors. "The beauty of it," according to Rai (2009), "is the low cost of our comics: 64 pages for fifteen rupees, 140 for forty rupees, and it is all in color." The low price is possible, according to Ashish Gupta (1993), because Diamond comics are "shoddily produced, printed on coarse newsprint, with little emphasis on visuals and storylines." To be fair, Diamond comics have been popular also because of their easy-to-recognize characters. Rai (2009) said that his intention has always been to capture "all profiles and audiences, from children who cannot read, kids' moms, adults, old people." To appeal to this diverse readership, Diamond issues comics in a number of genres (humor, detective, patriotic, adventure, space, and mythology) and uses eighty characters; nine different ones are

featured monthly on a rotating basis so that each character makes an appearance every two to three months (Rai 2009). Total monthly sales of Diamond comics reach 1.5 million copies.

Early on, Diamond actively commercialized its comics through merchandising and licensing. Their characters adorn all types of "cartoonized junk," including shoes, soft drinks, bubble gum, pencils, dolls, calendars, and the like. Diamond comics sometimes come with a free gift encased in a plastic overlay; other times, the comics are attached to manufacturers' products. Rai (2009) said that he also produces minicomics, normally sold at forty paise (0.4 rupees) a copy but also given away as product endorsements. Rai (2009) elaborated: "The kids collect four Fanta soda bottle caps, or a Maggi noodle packet and receive a free minicomic." Advertising for multinational companies' merchandise printed in the comic books brings additional revenue, as do books whose characters or stories represent the products

themselves, for example, Rasna Genie to market Rasna soft drink concentrate, Lifebuoy soap, and Big Bubble bubble gum. Rai (2009) added that “all” television serials are advertised in Diamond comics, and, at times, film synopses are presented in comics form.

Diamond has moved significantly into the electronic/digital arena, its comics appearing in mobile, Internet, and direct-to-home formats; a twenty-four-hour Diamond Comics television channel that will use all of its characters (and some foreign ones), airing in all major regional languages, is in the works.

#### Raj Comics, Manoj Comics, and Others

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, other publishers brought out comic books with varying degrees of success. Two of them, Raj and Manoj, were respectively started by the estranged Gupta brothers (Manish and Sanjay) in what can only be described as a flammable competitive atmosphere, so hot that warehouses were sometimes set ablaze. Both companies produced what Aruna Rao (2001, 58) called a “blend of action, fantasy, and horror hard to categorize,” with traces of Western, Amar Chitra Katha, and other influences.

An offshoot of Raja Pocket Books, Raj Comics (founded in 1986) catered to Hindi-speaking northerners with four types of stories: “Medieval fantasies, in which manufactured rural and urban legends are set in a vaguely delineated medieval past involving swords and sorcery; horror comics published in the *Thrill Horror Suspense* series, with stories involving mad scientists who turn into giant bats, or a man murdered by his own shadow; super hero comics, where a hero with a special ability or mutation battles villains; and comedies” (Rao 2001, 59). Further characteristics that Rao (2001, 59) attributed to Raj Comics include powerful narratives and strong female protagonists in fantasy stories; much gore, blood, and bizarre plots in horror titles; Western inclinations in the superhero genre; and feature-length, character-driven humor stories tinged with horror and fantasy. Some books were popular enough to be made into Bollywood films, such as *Doga*, featuring a vigilante



FIG. 15.9. The female warrior Himanchi in Raj Comics' *Mayajal*. Ca. 1993. Courtesy of Aruna Rao.

wearing a dog mask, and *Nagraj*, about blood that contains tiny snakes that breathe venom into enemies' respiratory systems.

Raj Comics was a survivor of a bleak period in Indian comics from 1997 to 2003, when comic book sales declined because of keen competition from foreign titles and new media and dwindling interest among children. By 2008, Raj sales had dropped from a peak of seven hundred thousand copies to three hundred thousand–four hundred thousand copies. By one report, Raj still outsold all other Indian comic brands put together. Fifty thousand copies were printed of each comic book featuring an A-list character (Nagraj, Super Commander Dhruv, Doga, and others) and thirty thousand of each B-list character (Bankelal, Parmanu, and others) (Khanduri 2010, n. 3). Laura Nelson (2012) claimed that Raj Comics boasts twenty-five characters, “releases four editions a month and sells up to 100,000 copies a pop, mostly in Hindi, with a smattering of English editions for Indian expats.” In recent years, Raj has moved into digitalization; it has put current books online and reissued older ones in digital formats. Raj's competitor, the



Meerut-based Manoj Comics, did not make it through the aforementioned dark age of Indian comics.

Tulsi Comics and Fort Comics also published Hindi-language comic books of the blood-and-violence type in the 1980s and 1990s. Like Raj and Manoj, these publishers specialized in what has been described as a “mix of crude sex and violence, extremely distasteful and certainly deleterious” to young people (see *Surya India* 1993, 48–50). The Fort Comics series, one title of which was devoted to romance stories, was made up of lurid melodramas similar to pulp novels, aimed at a working-class audience.

As with the Indian film industry, comic books generally were designed for specific regional or linguistic audiences. In Tamil Nadu, the monthly *Muthu Comics* was launched by the Sivakasi-based Prakash Publishers in 1971. It was a thriving operation by the 1980s, even starting a new line, Lion Comics, in 1984. But it and other companies such as Rani Comics witnessed a major waning of interest in comics as television became more widespread; today, printed Tamil comic books have nearly disappeared, with hardly any new titles issued. There are comics websites in the language as well as an e-magazine-cum-e-comic (*Ka-Suvadi*) started by filmmaker B. Sivakumar.

The state of Kerala has had a spate of comic book publishers, two of which successfully sprouted from a children’s magazine and a comic strip, respectively. The abovementioned *Chandamama* children’s magazine, under new owner Geodesic Information Systems of Bombay, published a four-hundred-page comic book on the Ramayana and planned to introduce a series of individual comic books on the mythological stories of Vikram-Vetal, Dushtu Dattu, Panchatanta, Jataka, Arya, and Apoorva. Toms Publications gradually formed around the strip *Bobanum and Mollyum*, written by Toms (V. T. Thomas) for the daily *Malayala Manorama*, as discussed above. After Toms published his oldest Boban and Molly strips in comic book format (in the series Toms Comics) in 1983—to which *Malayala Manorama* reacted with charges of copyright violation—succeeding events led to the creation of a string

of comic books. To counter Toms Comics, the newspaper brought out a weekly magazine, *Manorama Comics*, also featuring Boban and Molly strips. To complicate matters further, Toms allowed *Kalakaumudi*, a rival magazine to *Malayala Manorama*’s weekly, to carry a strip titled *Toms Boban and Molly*, differentiated by the slight name change from the same strip carried in the weekly. The legal battles that ensued brought a boom in comic book production and sales; in short order, Toms Comics issued thirty-three comic book versions of Boban and Molly strips and introduced new strip characters such as Unnikuttan and the mischievous Babu and Sally, who also were given their own comic book titles. By 1992, Toms Publications produced three comic book titles (*Boban and Molly*, *Unnikuttan*, and *Babu and Sally*) and two humor magazines (*Kunchukurup* and *Toms Magazine*). Meanwhile, *Manorama Comics* became a political humor magazine (Varghese 1992). Toms Publications still publishes *Boban and Molly* and *Unnikuttan*, as well as *Mandoos* and *Tom’s Chitra Katha* (Sebastian 2009, 52–53).

Comic books cropped up in other states, sometimes in out-of-the-way places, produced single-handedly by comics aficionados. One such comic book was *Sudden Muanga* (contradictorily meaning “sudden slow”), a quarterly that appeared from 1976 through at least the early 1990s in the northeastern state of Mizoram. A college Mizo-language teacher, Lal Sang Zuala, started the cyclostyled *Sudden Muanga* to depict Mizo characteristics, expose the social evils of tribal people, and make fun of politicians. The main character (a cowboy) was described by Zuala as “sometimes very good, and a rascal, but a lovable person” (Chinai 1990).

## Comic Books: The Renaissance

The Indian comic book industry had a rebirth at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Amar Chitra Katha drew a fresh breath under new ownership; Diamond surged ahead, employing all types of marketing gimmicks; and new comic book companies appeared,



including Gotham/Virgin/Liquid, Vivalok, Vimanika, and Campfire. Tie-ins with animation and Bollywood, an expanding online presence, the use of multimedia platforms, the birth of Indian graphic novels, and the establishment of comics conventions all played a role in elevating the status of the comics.

#### Gotham→Virgin→Liquid Comics

Gotham Comics, Virgin Comics, and Liquid Comics are interlinked by their histories (successively evolving from one another) and their personnel. This business progression started in the late 1990s when adolescent Sharad Devarajan obtained the South Asian publishing rights for U.S. comic books and made them affordable and accessible by translating them into local languages and distributing them to locations frequented by young people. He utilized the comic book equivalent of ice cream trucks for distribution purposes. Devarajan helped finance his endeavor by selling advertisements in the comics.

The idea to market classic comics to South Asia came to Devarajan in 1996 when he interned with DC Comics in New York City. Able to convince DC that his proposal was workable, he and his partner, Suresh Seethanaraman, started what became the Gotham Entertainment Group.

Devarajan has maintained that despite his heavy involvement with foreign comics, his goal was always to “create our own properties that really could stand out at the forefront of the world” and “champion . . . young, dynamic Indian creativity” (Sydell 2007). In 2004, he moved a bit in that direction when he used his partnership with Marvel Comics to bring out a reinvented Spider-Man, featuring a Bombay boy bestowed with the power of a spider by a mysterious yogi. *Spider-Man: India* was what Devarajan termed “transcreation”—translating U.S. comic books and keeping their overall meaning and feeling intact, while integrating them with local languages and settings (Sangiaco 2004; for more on *Spider-Man India*, see Davé 2010).

Along the way, Devarajan teamed with Gotham Chopra, who recruited his father, the famous alternative

medicine guru Deepak Chopra, to join them. The result was Gotham Studios Asia, formed in 2004 as a joint venture between Intent, a media company run by Deepak Chopra and movie director Shekhar Kapur, and the Gotham Entertainment Group. Gotham Studios embarked on fulfilling Devarajan’s original objectives by recruiting and training an enlarged talent pool and creating Indian fare. Quickly, the company had five of its own books in production, among them *Devi*, a series about an overworked detective “torn between his devoted and dutiful wife and her alter ego, a superpowered, crime-fighting seductress” (S. Rai 2004, C6).

Virgin Comics came into existence in January 2006, when British billionaire Sir Richard Branson, through his company, Virgin Books, was persuaded to join Deepak Chopra, Shekhar Kapur, and Gotham Studios to initiate an enterprise they believed would rival manga as a world shaker. Two companies actually resulted: Virgin Comics LLC in New York City and Virgin Animation Private Limited in Bangalore. Contending that India has a strong storytelling tradition, Virgin planned to export works of Indian creators to the West, much as the Japanese had done with manga (see Abramowitz 2006).

Quickly, Virgin Comics started up a series of titles (*Sadhu*, *Snake Woman*, and *Ramayan 3392 AD* among them) and three comic book lines—Shakti, Director’s Cut, and Maverick (later Voices)—each of the latter with a distinct mission. Shakti comic books were to use Indian or Indian-based content and characters, while Director’s Cut was a collaboration with internationally acclaimed filmmakers such as John Woo, Guy Ritchie, Kapur himself, and others in a bid to find stories and the means of telling them to appeal to twelve- to twenty-one-year-old Indians. The third line, Voices, sought talent in all creative fields; names mentioned included actor Nicolas Cage, porn star Jenna Jameson, and British musician Dave Stewart. The comic books were launched in the United States, Europe, and India, and there were plans to develop them into related entertainment products (film, television, online content, gaming, mobile content, merchandise, etc.) Although stories were to be drawn from what Chopra called India’s “5000-year

vault” of culture, they were to mix mythology with the modern (see also Jha 2009).

Virgin Comics nourished its high profile by tying up with NBC Universal in 2003 to publish comic books that would be developed into television shows; announcing a year later that American comic book pioneer Stan Lee would edit/oversee a lineup of ten planned superhero comics; introducing books that placed real-life people in roles as comics characters (e.g., an Indian cricketer, a Miss World beauty queen, a 1980s singing and dancing sensation, and a Bollywood star); and developing a graphic novel series on Hindu deities and philosophies called Deepak Chopra Presents: India Authentic (see Sangwan 2007; Reid 2008; Segal 2007, C4).

Despite all the glitz, the Virgin plan was challenged for not being an Indian product. Graphic novelist Rimi Chatterjee (2009) said: “Virgin books looked good. You looked at them and WOW! But, when you read them, you knew it was just DC style. Everything looks like metal; people look like metal; hair looks like metal, etc. And DC and Marvel styles do not do well now. Virgin stories don’t make sense. They were just using the Western paradigm, which itself doesn’t work, and adding to it. They did not have a set idea on what they were doing.”

The Virgin Comics flame flickered and died in August 2008, when the New York City office was closed and employees dismissed. Devarajan blamed the shutdown on the “current macro-economic downturn,” but the sense was that the company had lost the backing of Branson’s empire (Bhushan 2008). The following month (September 2008), a “new” company, Liquid Comics, completed the management buyout of Virgin Comics. Liquid (now owned by Marvel), was simply a change of part of the proprietorship; in reality, it was a new name for Gotham and was still managed by Devarajan and Gotham Chopra. Liquid continued to venture into new media formats for its comics, and it retained Stan Lee as an overseer. In fact, one of its latest comic books, *Chakra: The Invincible*, about a poor boy with big ambitions and a fated future, was credited as being inspired by Lee.

## Vivalok Comics

The short-lived Vivalok Comics was at the vanguard of the recent movement of comic book publishers to render new versions of Indian mythologies. Started in 2001, the Delhi-based company was the brainchild of former *Eye* editor Rukmini Sekhar, also founder of the Viveka Foundation, a center offering alternative perspectives in the field of publishing. In her publishing program, Sekhar aimed to address a variety of contemporary issues from the perspective of ancient tales, although the tales tended to emanate from small geographical regions.

Trying to link today’s reality to legend, Vivalok Comics dealt with centuries-old problems related to gender issues, environmental degradation, labor exploitation, animal rights, witch hunting, and communalism. Sekhar (2009) gave some examples: “We brought environment into the first *The Sunderbans* book. *The Santhals* dealt with a very poor tribal area that was exploited. Panihari is portrayed as a lonely woman in the desert as the men go off to work, something that is still happening. *The Magic Carpet* had a child labor theme. It was meant to sensitize Swiss buyers from buying carpets produced by Indian child labor.” Portrayals of mythological characters differed from those in other comic books, Sekhar (2009) said, explaining:

We used whimsical goddesses who were not always beautiful. We did not always have goody-goody characters. We tried to deconstruct folklore from the Amar Chitra Katha format. We didn’t do the usual king/queen stories. For example, we did the grassroots view of Sita’s banishment (which shows her as a heroine, rather than helpless victim) [see also McLain 2009b, 161]. We showed how the grand [royal] tradition was perceived by the little [common people’s] tradition. In one story, Ram is portrayed with smoke coming out of his ears. These are primary stories from the grassroots view that came to us from the grassroots.

Vivalok’s major concerns were that the stories came out of “micro regions,” not whole states, and that they



FIG. 15.10. Inside page of *The Sunderbans*. Vivalok Comics. Vol. 1, March 2002. Courtesy of Rukmini Sekhar.

were told by people from these small communities. Sekhar (2009) said: “We’d ask folklorists to name people to give us, say, twenty stories from [their] region—both fresh stories and passed-down stories. We’d also ask people to send photos from their communities that were authentic (of the people’s dress, habitats, etc.) so that we could draw it.” In Sekhar’s view, India is becoming homogenized in kinship, clothing, customs, and rituals, with resultant adverse effects upon the cultural diversity for which the country has long been known and upon the public’s familiarity with that pluralism. She said, as an example: “We had so many problems with young

illustrators. We’d say to them, ‘Can you draw authentically how the sari can be worn in other regions?’ There are a thousand ways, but they didn’t know how to do this” (Sekhar 2009).

Vivalok comic books purposely used an “intellectual approach,” but one that was readable. Each book of sixty-four pages and ten stories focused on one region, accenting that region’s history, geography, local words, food, attire, and life-cycle rituals through the use of Indian-style drawings, varied shapes and sizes of frames, and a color scheme that switched from very bright to pale or black and white. Also, each book contained a



map of the region, a footnoted glossary “to bring in the usage of local words, expletives, and expressions,” a textual description of the ethnic groups featured, and a section on local riddles, folk songs, and ballads. The stories, Sekhar said, were obscure folktales handed down by grandmothers in an earlier age, making Vivalok Comics a “verbal grandmother” (Varkey 2003). In each book, an eighteen-year-old cartoon figure named Roama narrated the stories with her “friend” Dicti, a Dictaphone.

Manga had some influence on Vivalok Comics; Sekhar (2009) explained: “We tried to bring in manga intensity in terms of frames (layout of page). The onomatopoeia is very Indian. We used a manga-style vibrancy in page layout. There is a lot of movement in the layouts, with insets, overlapping images, etc.”

Sekhar discontinued Vivalok because of a lack of funding and her inability to handle both editorial and business duties. She said that she has a number of well-researched manuscripts that could be published (Sekhar 2009; for more on Vivalok, see also McLain 2009a, 2009b, 2009c; Rajan 2003).

### Vimanika Comics

Named after an early-twentieth-century Sanskrit text, Vimanika Comics was formed in reaction to the entry of UK-based Virgin Comics into the world of Indian mythology. Founders Karan Vir Arora and Kanika Choudhary believed that, as Indians, they were better able to depict the country’s myths, and in 2008 they launched their company with the mission to bring Indian mythology to “everybody in the world” (*Indo-Asian News Service* 2009). They planned to achieve this tall order, according to Arora, by presenting not only “comics with world class art and colouring but also with real, authentic and well-researched content from Indian mythology, which most of our competitors failed to do” (*Indo-Asian News Service* 2009). Arora elaborated that the veracity of his comics was ensured by the guidance he received from two top scholars and by the principle that myth must be reconnected to history and science (Khanduri 2010). He explained

that “past conquerors have changed our history into myth” and that the values and role models of that history must be recaptured, which he hoped to do with Vimanika Comics (Khanduri 2010).

From its beginnings, Vimanika Comics sought a broadened scope as it planned books on other Asian myths and even Celtic myths and fashioned stories with appeal to Indians both at home and abroad. Cofounder Choudhary, stating that Indian American readers wanted something different from just superheroes, believed that Vimanika Comics met this demand by providing ancient warrior themes with a modern twist, refreshingly presented and authentically told (*Indo-Asian News Service* 2009). These characteristics were evident in the company’s first three titles: *The Sixth*, based on Karna from the Mahabharata; *Mokshas*, on Hanuman and Parshuram; and *Dashaavatar*, featuring Vishnu with two arms rather than the conventional four.

Arora changed direction by 2011 when Vimanika Studios created from scratch and developed Don the Origin, an unusual superhero character popular in graphic novels as well as film. Arora described Don in the context that “[s]uperheroes have evolved for sure; they have a darker past reflecting the times we live in. For example, Batman doesn’t have any super powers but acts out of his intentions. Don is also like a hero in his own sense, he’s got a past, he’s cool, smart, keen, cunning but very sharp. He thinks and acts like a businessman” (Mazumder 2012). Vimanika Studios is following the trend of the comic book industry generally to move into multiple formats, especially to animation and film but also onto mobile phones and the Internet.

### Campfire

The reason businessman Keshav Thirani has given for starting Campfire in 2007 reads like a page out of Anant Pai’s diary. Thirani and his family were on holiday when he observed his grandchildren reading comic books, which, upon examination, he denounced as “rubbish.” At that point, he decided to launch Campfire, to “get children to read, to educate them in a nontextbook way,”

according to Editorial Director Andrew Dodd (2009). Admitting that many of Campfire's titles are "along the lines of what Amar Chitra Katha published," Dodd said that the difference lay in the more modern, graphic novel style that Campfire used (2009).

Thirani, whose other companies manufacture gas pipelines and parts for railway metro systems on a global scale, recognized that his comics and graphic novels needed a broader repertoire of stories and a wider distribution than just that of India. He has published both Western and Indian mythologies, classics, biographies, and original works, and distribution has been facilitated through contacts made at U.S. and European book fairs and over the Internet (Dodd 2009; Thirani 2009). Dodd said that selling the comics through the Campfire's website yielded more profits than selling through distributors, who demand a 50 percent fee (2009).

Originally, the goal was to publish five titles monthly, but this proved impractical because of the shortage of writers qualified to create high-quality scripts. Writers work on a freelance basis at Campfire, as did artists in the beginning. Because freelance artists would "go off for two months and we'd have no word from them, we have now made the art 'in-house,'" Dodd said (2009).

When I visited the two-story studio (one floor each devoted to editorial and art) in 2009, the forty-four person staff included fifteen pencillers and eight illustrators, five of the latter working manually. The artists, most of whom are in their thirties, have university fine arts backgrounds. Art Director Rajeesh Kumar said that the artists "look at how other artists drew the classics over the years and then try to improve on that." He added, "I allow them to deviate from the script if they have a satisfactory explanation" (Kumar 2009).

Campfire avoids copyright clearance by primarily using classics that are in the public domain; "outdated" stories are modified, Kumar said (2009). A typical book contains seventy-two pages of beautifully designed, brilliantly colored panels, detailing mainly Western classics (*Treasure Island*, *Moby Dick*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Joan of Arc*, etc.), but also tales of Eklavya, Vishnu, Sita, Arjun, Bhima, and others from Indian mythology.

## Other Companies, Other Dimensions

Other comics initiatives have cropped up in India since the late 2000s, although they tend to be smaller operations. Nevertheless, the interest they generate bodes well for a rebirth of the Indian comics industry, estimated to be worth more than one hundred million U.S. dollars in 2011.

Many self-publishing endeavors have been attempted, in Calcutta, New Delhi, Bombay, Bangalore, and Kerala (Murthy 2009), one example being Kriyetic Comics in Calcutta. Attempting to restore Indian graphic storytelling, and no doubt cut costs, Kriyetic solicited stories from readers, giving them an opportunity to win a thousand rupees for a five-page entry.

More substantial companies recently dealing with comics are Green Gold, M4 Comics, and Pop Culture Publishing. Green Gold, also publishers of coloring books, converted the cartoon *Chhota Bheem* into a comic book that sold more than ten thousand copies of its first issue. Aimed at five- to ten-year-olds, *Chhota Bheem Comics* was to be distributed throughout South Asia and developed into multimedia platforms and a line of merchandising (Shetty 2009a). M4 Comics of Delhi was the product of a veteran Marvel and Vimanika penciller Dheeraj Varma. With an eight-person staff, M4 planned twenty comic books and eight to ten graphic novels its first year. M4 Comics focused on mythology in a fusion of Western and Indian styles. As with earlier companies such as Virgin and Amar Chitra Katha, M4 hoped to release its comics worldwide (Shetty 2009b).

Pop Culture Publishing is part of Twenty Onwards Media, a company of four businesses founded by Jatin Varma in 2007. By January 2012, Pop Culture had brought out eight titles with another fifteen in the pipeline. Among its works was a series spun off from Hergé's *Tintin*. Created by Jhangir Kerawala, *The Adventures of Timpa* stars a fourteen-year-old boy, the son of a police inspector, who roams Calcutta solving crimes. The first three books in the series, all released at Comic Con India, were *Operation Rescue*; *Red-Hooded Gang*, based on a run of bank robberies in Calcutta in 1983–1984; and

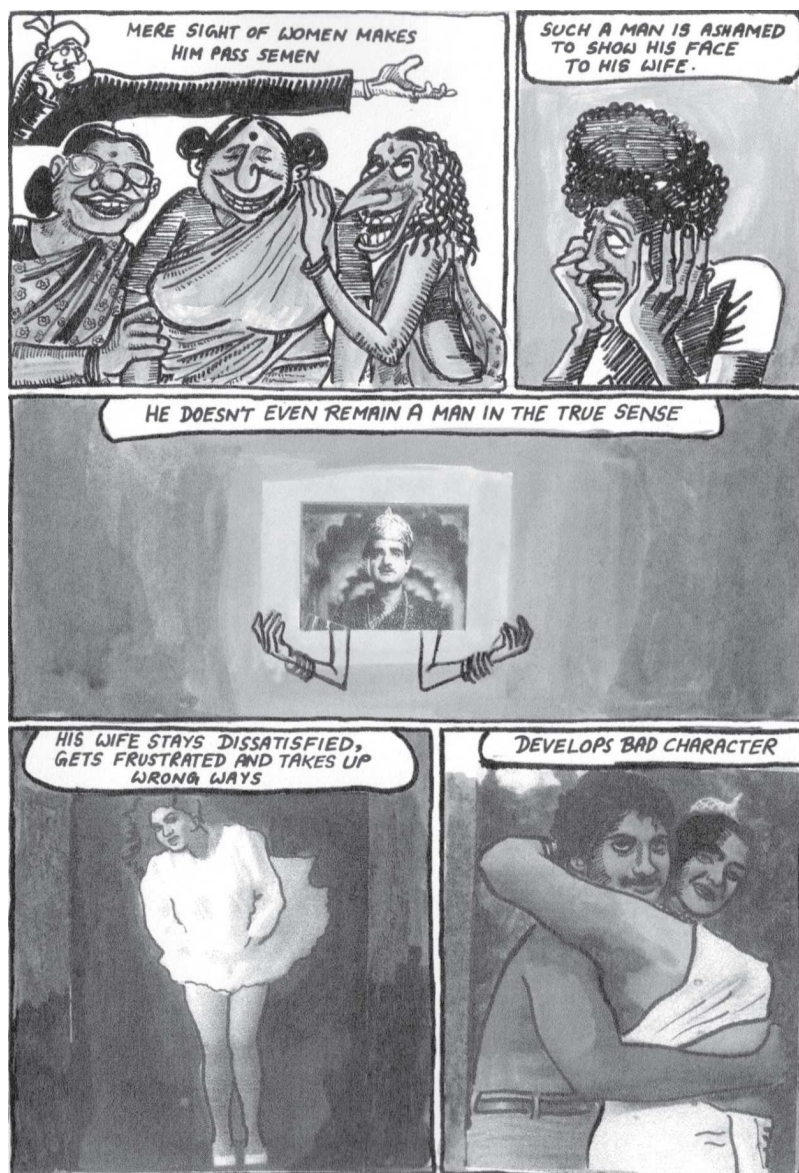


FIG. 15.11. Inside page of Sarnath Banerjee's graphic novel *Corridor*. 2004. The work intermingles photographs with cartoons, black and white with color, simple line drawings with detailed illustrations.

*Legacy of the Gods*, about intelligent aliens who visited Earth years ago (Agarwal 2012).

With the onrush of enthusiasm for comic books and graphic novels in India, new companies keep appearing, bringing out more adult-related content than previously was the case; examples include Bangalore-based Manta Ray, which recently released the wordless graphic novel *Hush*, dealing with the previously taboo topic of father-daughter sexual abuse; and Level 10 Entertainment of Bombay, which has a title that contains Hindi profanity. Level 10 Entertainment also publishes the monthly *Comic JUMP* for eighteen- to thirty-year-old urbanites.

Other new companies are Holy Cow Entertainment, which plans to publish six comics and one graphic novel yearly, and Comix-India, which publishes online with a print-on-demand option. Leaping Windows in Bombay does not publish comics but delivers comics and graphic novels from its two-thousand-title inventory to subscribers' homes.

In 2011, Jatin Varma started the annual Comic Con India, an event held in New Delhi, where he and about twenty other publishers launch their comic books and graphic novels. Comic Con has been a crowd drawer, attracting more than thirty-five thousand visitors and



fifty exhibitors (and racking up a hundred thousand dollars in sales) in 2012. Exhibitors reported emptying their shelves; Amar Chitra Katha sold a thousand copies of its children's magazine *Tinkle* each day of the convention, and Green Gold twenty-five hundred copies of *Chhota Bheem*.

Graphic novels and digitized versions of Indian comics characters were also promoted at Comic Con. Although Sarnath Banerjee is often given credit for creating the first Indian graphic novel, Orijit Sen actually preceded him with *The River of Stories* in 1994, a sixty-page comic booklet published in New Delhi. Banerjee's *Corridor*, centering around a second-hand bookstore, its brilliant owner, and his customers, was published by Penguin in 2004. His second graphic novel was *The Barn Owl's Wondrous Capers*, an Indianized version of the myth of Cartaphilus, the Wandering Jew (see Indrasimhan 2007; Duara 2007). Banerjee spurred the graphic novel movement, making himself visible as a graphic novelist and helping originate the Pao Collective, a small group of artists who organized in 2008 hoping to publish anthologies and earn their daily bread (*pao*) from their art. In 2006 and 2007, India's first publishing house catering to graphic novelists, Phantomville, brought out *The Believers* (2006, by Partha Sengupta and Abdul Sultan), about two Muslim brothers in Kerala who take different routes—one to Edinburgh to pursue an academic career, the other to a terrorist group and religious fundamentalism; and *Kashmir Pending* (2007, by Naseer Ahmed and Saurath Singh), recounting the transformation of a young Kashmiri man into a hard-core terrorist (Gopalakrishnan 2009b).

Other graphic novels have come in a steady procession, recent ones being a version of Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography (Janhavi Prasada), *Chairman Meow and the Protectors of the Proletariat* (Abhijeet Kini and Anant Singh), *Munkeeman and Widhwa Ma and Andhi Behen* (both by Harsho Mohan Chatteraj), *Bhimayana* (Srividya Natarajan and S. Anand, a biography of the revolutionary Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar [see Nayar 2001]), *Kari and Parva* (Amruta Patil), *The Hotel at the End of the World* (Parismita Singh), *Private-Eye*

*Anonymous* (Tejas Modak), and *Kalpa Shadowfalls* (Rimi Chatterjee). About the latter, Chatterjee (2009) said that it was the "first time a full-scale graphic novel utilizing all of the resources of the form has been done in India." The book was a project of Kriyetic Graphic Studio. Chatterjee (2009) talked about the problems that go with graphic novel publication:

The problems generally are how to get capital in an immature market. The venture capital market in India has to become more responsive to the creative side. There is too much reliance on Western models, especially DC and Marvel. Also, there is a lack of good writers; a fixation with traditional genres. Money is scarce; investors are shy, and getting access to foreign markets is difficult. Indian publishers are puzzled on how to develop and sell graphic novels. Publishers have no budget for development. Start-up costs (paying artists, etc.) are not covered by publishers. I had to pay forty-five thousand U.S. dollars to get *Kalpa* published. I won't get that back.

Chatterjee (2009) was fortunate that HarperCollins took an interest in her book and advanced her royalties for three subsequent editions of *Kalpa*, making up for her initial investment.

From about the time of the first Comic Con India in February 2011, the graphic novel began to find its rightful place in Indian arts and letters. Having much to do with this positioning was Samhita Arni's *Sita's Ramayana*, which garnered rave reviews and made it to the *New York Times* best seller list as one of the top-selling graphic novels in the United States. Arni not only gave a different perspective on the Ramayana but also employed illustrations in the style of Bengal's folk-art *patua* (Bagchi 2011).

Indian graphic novels have reversed the comic book's slavish attachment to mythological stories, instead dealing with serious social issues such as caste in *A Gardener in the Wasteland*, the portrayal of women in *Sita's Ramayana*, terrorism and fundamentalism in *Kashmir Pending*, and the Bombay underworld in *Mumbai Confidential*; and rendering identifiable Indian locales for the

characters—a Hyderabad pizza delivery boy in *Hyderabadi Biryani*, a dog-faced North Indian superhero in *Und Bilaw Manus*, and a bizarre, legendary Delhi character in *Munkeeman*. Unconventional superheroes and antiheroes have also shown up in recent graphic novels, examples being *Munkeeman*, *Ravanayan*, *Don the Origin*, and *Und Bilaw Manus*.

In recent years, cinema and television characters and programs such as *Sholay*, *Don*, *Ra-One*, and *Agent Vinod* have provided source materials for graphic novels. In some cases, the graphic novels have not strictly followed the film scripts; for example, the graphic novel based on *Agent Vinod* takes place before the events of the film and carries a different title, *The Jungfrau Encounter* (Naval-Shetye 2012).

As the 2010s approached, digitalization and multi-platform usage became common to Indian comics. Diamond Comics planned a cartoon channel based on its characters; Vimanika Comics launched its e-comics; Raj Comics began what it called “motion comics,” a hybrid of comic books and animation based on actual panels of a comic (Shetty 2009c); and all three, in addition to ACK Media, made their comics available to the 350 million mobile phone users across the country (Kaira 2009).

Animated comics have already been done by Diamond, ACK, and Raj with its motion comics. Raj planned to release two motion comics monthly, drawing material from its more than three thousand comic book titles. Under new management, ACK Media has moved to multiplatforms, making their print and digital products available in more than five hundred retail stores; introducing online services (including an online store); and licensing, merchandising, and codeveloping content for film and television as well as mobile and other new media (Bajaj 2009).

The Internet has proven valuable to others wishing to create comics. Websites and blogs have served as interactive media for amateur artists and groups, and indeed for anyone interested in comics with input to convey. In 2011–2012, the brothers Ali and Arif Vakil started a blog and then set up the popular website 40 Sufi Comics, a collection of short, simply-stated comic strips on

the teachings of Islam, which have become immensely popular. In 2012, Syed Mukkaram Niyaz, recognizing that Urdu dailies in major cities no longer carry comic strips, created the website [www.urdukidzcartoon.com](http://www.urdukidzcartoon.com) for Urdu comics (Aneez 2012).

## Conclusion

Indian comic art has made much progress since the early 2000s, reinvigorating some of what existed before and adding new dimensions such as new comics companies, digitalization, graphic novels, and modernized stories and characters.

Despite the many advances made, the Indian comics industry still faces serious problems such as reaching a multilingual, multicultural population and curbing the tendencies to emphasize the commercial over the artistic, quantity over quality, and high technology over good storytelling. The industry must also be vigilant of encroachments of Western and Japanese comics, the overuse of Indian mythological stories, and the edging out of comics and their characters by synthetic imitations in the form of “cartoonized junk.”

## Notes

1. Also published in Madras in 1993, when I interviewed cartoonists there, was the humor magazine *Tuglaq*, a fortnightly named after a sixteenth-century Mogul emperor who was reputed to foul up whatever was brought to his attention. *Tuglaq*, started in 1970, was published and edited by the famous playwright and film actor Cho S. Ramaswamy for most of its existence. Ramaswamy (1993) said that his periodical was not just satirical but also keenly analytical.

2. In some cases, comic books and newspaper comic strips have been lumped together, without a distinction made between them.

3. Padmanabhan (1995) discussed the origins of *Suki*: “I was often depressed, angry and resentful at the world. My strip was a way to send that dissatisfaction rippling outwards, disguised as a cartoon character, Suki. . . . Suki had no dependants, did no housework, was inept even at boiling water and [had] little interest in either earning money or spending money.”

4. The brothers separated in the company in 1999.

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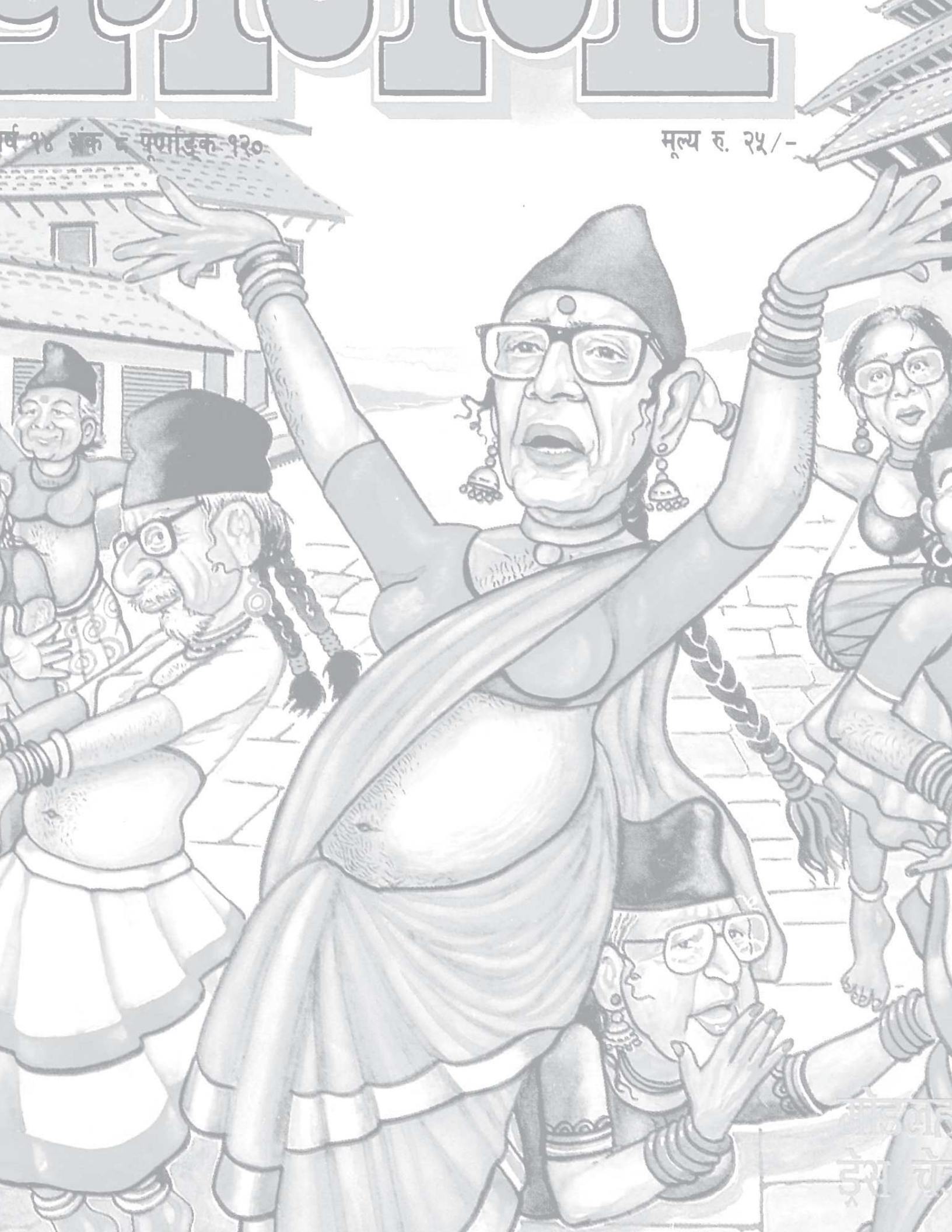


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वर्ष १४ अंक ८ पूर्णाङ्क १२०

मूल्य रु. २५/-



संस्कृत  
देश चेत



The substantial amount of comic art that Nepal has sported for the past half century has, for the most part, not included newspaper strips and comic books. More prominent have been political cartoons and occasional humor/cartoon magazines, the latter associated with the nation's annual Gaijatra (Cow's) festival.

### Comic Strips and Comic Books

The shortage of newspaper strips may be a matter of definition. A search for multipanel strips does not yield much; however, if the definition of a strip is stretched to include one-panel humor cartoons, which it sometimes does (e.g., *The Far Side*, *Out Our Way*, and others in the United States), then the void is partially filled. The definition problem is compounded in countries whose newspapers feature pocket cartoons—small, one-panel drawings usually on the front pages of newspapers carrying a fixed name and logo and humorously commenting on political and social issues.<sup>1</sup>

Nepali newspapers have had a relatively brief tradition of displaying pocket cartoons. After 1990, when democracy came to Nepal, pocket cartoons were visible on the pages of nearly all dailies, and by 2000 they showed up in the corners of most newspapers regularly—about every six days. Among the titles appearing from 1990 to roughly 2010 were *Ao ho ra?* in *Gorkhapatra*, the nation's oldest daily dating to 1901; *Gajab chha ba*, *Kya baat*, and *Basibasailo*, all in *Kantipur*; *Tirimiri* in *Spacetime*; *Yastai ta rahe chha* in the *Himalayan Times*; *Sincha-dhuncha* in *Naya Sadak*; *Chadke Aanhha* in *Nepal Samacharpatra*; and *Sandai* in *Matribhumi*. In the 1990s, Bala Ram Thapa (pen name, Baratha) drew *Rang-birang* (Color-discolor) along with the parody cartoons *Tarang* (Whim, which included parody songs) and *Bairang*, all in *Gorkhapatra*.

Although comic strips do not have a rich history in Nepal, there is evidence that semblances of them existed in the mid-1960s. Durga Baral (pen name, Batsyayana), in a forty-five-plus-year career, drew a number of humor strips and panels as well as political cartoons, some of

## Chapter 16

# Nepal



FIG. 16.1. Durga Baral (Batsyayana) has had a cartoon career stretching back to the 1960s. June 25, 2006. Photo courtesy of Bikas Rauniar.

which brought him threats from officials. From 1964 to 1967, he had a cartoon column in the weekly *Naya Sandesh* entitled “*Naya Sandesh ko Dristikon Baralbata*” (Views of *Naya Sandesh* from Baral) (R. K. Panday 1997, 51). Baral (2002) said he was actually a painter who got into cartooning by accident when editors asked him to draw cartoons. One such request came in 1977–1978, when his friends started a literary magazine, *Prangan*, to which he was asked to contribute what he called a strip, *Chyangbaa*. Baral (2002) said that his strip was similar to *Dharmayuga* in India. He also contributed the one-panel *Bikaas* to *Prangan* during the magazine’s four-year run. Other gag strips and panels followed, all characterized by Batsyayana’s irrepressible wit and humor (often based on his own family’s antics) (A. Baral 2006) and his abundance of painting skills. Among them were *Aveyentar* in *Suruchi* in the 1980s and *Pale*

*Punya Bahadur* in the UNICEF periodical *Nawadrishya* of the 1990s. Batsyayana’s art captured the essence of Nepali society and, in the process, propelled him to the status of the country’s foremost cartoonist (see also Haviland 2006).

Other strips published since 1990 have been Kirti Kishor Joshi’s *Ashamaru* in the top film magazine *Kamana* (Wish), and Bijuli Prasad and Netra Bahadur in the dailies *Kantipur* and *Gorkhapatra*, respectively; Suman Manandhar’s *Bekhaman*, a satire of politics and social events that ran in *Gorkhapatra* roughly through the 1990s (Manandhar 2002); and strips printed more recently in *Gorkhapatra*’s special Saturday issues such as *Birkhe*, *Rame*, and *Rameko Chartikala*. Nepali strips are humor based; adventure strips have not been popular.

Reasons that can be ventured for the retarded development of comic strips (and, to a degree, comic books as well) in Nepal are the lack of exposure to strips outside Nepal and techniques applied to them; the long-standing problems of newspapers (the primary venue for strips), particularly severe financial and political restraints; and the type of thinking that has historically isolated visual humor to one short period every year, devoted to the Gaijatra festival. Other problems that newspapers have faced for much of their existence in Nepal certainly had spillovers to cartoons and comics, such as the inability to attract adequate talent because journalism was not considered an “honorable profession” and the reluctance of individuals and groups to invest heavily in the press and, by extension, in other media, particularly media as marginal as comic books (B. Rana 1982, 468, 476).

Comic books in Nepal have had an even more dismal past than newspaper strips. Besides the obstacles already mentioned, the development of comic books has been hindered by the importation of Indian titles. As cartoonist Rajendra Rana (2002) said, Indian characters are well known in Nepal, and they dominate. Rana (2002) elaborated on other shortcomings: “Where can we find the market for our own stuff and where can we send those . . . in which markets? The sale in Nepal is not sufficient enough.” Understandably, publishers have had



FIG. 16.2. *Sanchai cha?*, perhaps Nepal's first humor magazine with cartoons. 1968. Courtesy of Ram Kumar Panday.

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no interest in publishing comic books that have limited marketability.

Illustrated humor books and magazines and cartoon anthologies are sometimes lumped together with comic books by Nepali writers. Ram Kumar Panday (1997) claimed that *Sanchai cha?*, which he wrote and Tek Bir Mukhiya illustrated and which was published in 1968, was the first humor book in Nepal with “full-fledged” cartoons. Identifying the first Nepali comic book as normally defined elsewhere is a mind-boggling task; there are several claimants to that honor. Panday (1997) believed that *Charkhutte ko chamatkar*, which he and the humor society HaSaNe were responsible for in 1992, was the country’s “first comic book.” Panday mobilized six cartoonists to prepare what he called *Four-Footed Magic*, which he vaguely made synonymous with *Charkhutte ko chamatkar*. Maharani Lamsal (2009) advanced the starting date of comic books to 2009, when Sher Publications of Kathmandu launched *Ko bhanda ko kam?* (Who is outclassing whom?), a Laurel-and-Hardy-like duo who try to outdo each other. The title is based on the funny situations contrived by Nepal’s most popular radio-television comedians, Madan Krishna Shrestha and Hari Bansha Acharya, known by their combined initials, MaHa. Drawn by Abin Shrestha and written by Suresh Kiran, *Ko bhanda*

*ko kam?* was expected to appear thrice yearly and to be marketed to countries with a large Nepali diaspora (such as in the Middle East).<sup>2</sup>

Comic books designed to raise social consciousness about literacy, the status of girls in society, the workings of democracy, and various social issues have appeared in Nepal since at least the 1980s. About that time, the Ministry of Education and Culture of Nepal and World Education, a U.S. private volunteer organization, issued four ninety-six-page comic books to teach literacy, using “dramatic stories in comic format that are serialized between two books, thus adding to learners’ motivation to continue with the cases” (Comings 1990, 4). The Meena Communication Initiative, launched by UNICEF in 1998 to favorably change perceptions and behaviors with respect to girls in South Asia, although predominantly animation structured, had a Nepali comic book component. The U.S. embassy in Kathmandu, in 2008, published four comic books on how democracy works in Nepal (Ranjit 2008), and World Comics India more recently brought out *Baal Sansar: Nepali Comics Compilation*, consisting of more than fifty comics stories created by Nepali children on various social issues. Beginning in 1993, Mohan Shyam Maharjan (Khokana) created a series of comic books for Nepal’s Women’s Rehabilitation Centre.



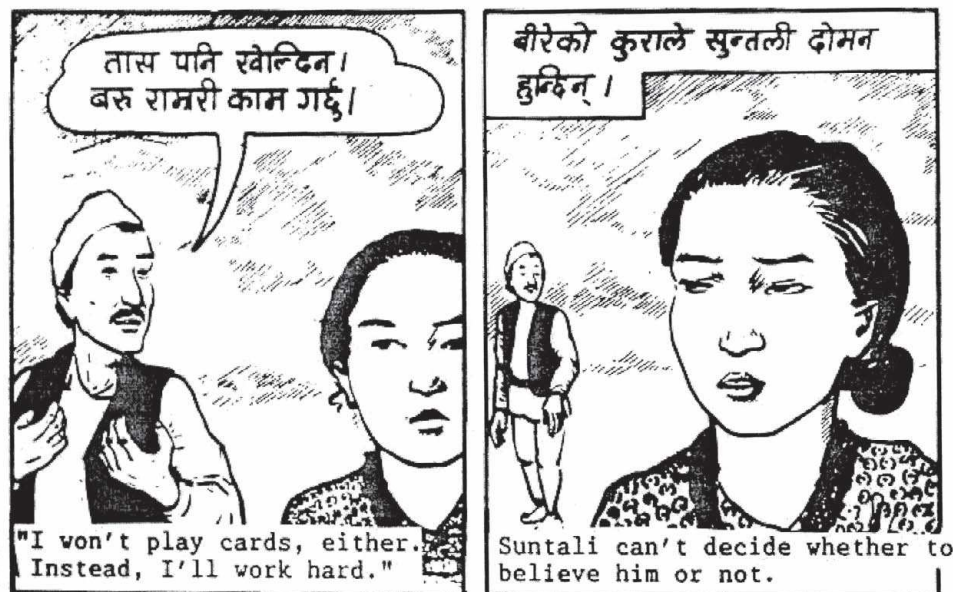


FIG. 16.3. Panels of a literacy comic book, jointly published by the Nepali Ministry of Education and Culture and the U.S. NGO World Education. English translation added.



FIG. 16.4. *Miss Moti and the Porno Nights* by Kripa Joshi. From [http://www.missmoti.com/Miss\\_Moti/Gallery/Gallery.html](http://www.missmoti.com/Miss_Moti/Gallery/Gallery.html).

Comic books and comic strips may be moving from the shadows of Nepali cartooning as artists network with their counterparts abroad, study outside the country, and discover the possibilities of the Internet. Kripa Joshi has experienced a modicum of success with a comic book character, Miss Moti, that she conceptualized while pursuing a BFA degree at New York City's School of Visual Arts. Almost entirely textless, Joshi's books *Miss Moti and Her Short Stories*, *Miss Moti and Cotton Candy*, and *Miss Moti and the Big Apple* (the latter two part of a five-part series) were born from the author's struggle with her body image. The character is portrayed as a role model for heavy women. Her name plays on a double entendre: *moti* means "fat or plump woman" when pronounced hard, "pearl" when pronounced soft. Joshi said that in Nepal comics are thought of as only funny and lighthearted, but she learned while overseas that they can be more than that (Sharma 2012; see also Naik 2013). Preena Shrestha started her Facebook page strip while studying abroad at the University of Technology, Sydney. Called *Lunch-Hour Doodles*, the "candid and funny strip" is not meant to be Nepali, but universal (Bhandari 2009).

### A Brief History of Cartooning

Because of archival shortcomings, uncertainty surrounds the origins of cartooning in Nepal. A revolutionary and

artist, Chandraman Maskey, drew illustrated posters resembling cartoons that attacked the Rana dynasty in the late 1930s and early 1940s; they were plastered on street walls around the Kathmandu valley (R. K. Panday 2002). As he was about to be arrested, Maskey destroyed his works, save for one pencil sketch his wife kept, but it has never surfaced. In 1943 and 1944, the periodical *Udaya* used cartoons by anonymous artists in six different issues, and in 1951, *Aawaaj* (Voice) may have published cartoons, but there is no tangible proof (as related to author by cartoon historian Fungma Fudong in 2003).

Usually credited with drawing the first newspaper cartoons in Nepal is Gobardhan Shah, whose scant works began to appear in *Samyukta Prayas* in 1957. His brother, Sashi Shah (2002), set the beginning date as 1956, claiming that he too began to publish cartoons in *Samyukta Prayas* a year or two later. According to Sashi Shah, Gobardhan worked in the Nepalese foreign service, where he was privileged to see cartoons in foreign magazines, which impressed him. In a 2002 interview with Fungma Fudong, Sashi Shah described the early days of Nepali cartooning:

There were no proper tools to make cartoons in those days. There weren't many newspapers in Nepal. There wasn't any trend of printing cartoons in papers. They were considered a waste of money. . . . We didn't have offset presses like we do nowadays. We didn't even have zinc blocks. We had to make use of wooden blocks to make cartoons, which obviously did not print nicely. . . . Newspapers sometimes used to pay and sometimes, they didn't. . . . Things weren't done in a professional manner back then. Cartoons were just made for making's sake.

From the late 1950s to the early 1970s, others followed on the heels of the Shah brothers. In 1959, the painter Kulman Singh Bhandari (Gwange) drew some political cartoons for *Hal Khabar*; and in the 1960s, Durga Baral, Tek Bir Mukhiya, Bala Ram Thapa, Mohan Shyam Maharjan, Narasingha Bhakta Tulachan (Kaushik), and Rama Kamara began their drawing careers, usually in

newspapers but, as the 1970s approached, occasionally in magazines such as *Mayalu* and *Kaliyug*.

As Sashi Shah (2002) indicated, often individuals who submitted cartoons to periodicals did so at the request of editors; they had little knowledge about cartooning, as Durga Baral (2002) admitted: "A friend introduced me to the publisher of *Naya Sandesh*. I took the job of cartoonist not out of interest, but much like a profession, and simply as a job. I had no idea or knowledge about cartoons. The editor explained to me what and how I was supposed to make cartoons. I made whatever he told me to do and I did it for four years." Veteran cartoonist/ animator Ujjwol Kundan Jyapu (2002) felt that, even into the twenty-first century, Nepali cartoonists did not "really understand what a cartoon is really about." He said: "For them, they look at some magazines and newspapers, then, they start off their careers as cartoonists in this manner."

Important outlets for budding cartoonists in the 1960s and 1970s were the new humor magazines that emerged on the occasion of the annual Gaijatra festival,<sup>3</sup> a favorite time for cartoonists. In 1962, the newspaper *Naya Samaj* published a humor issue during Gaijatra; other periodicals followed with humor/cartoon issues, which became integral parts of the festivities. The top film magazine, *Kamana*, always gave an entire issue over to comic strips and panels during Gaijatra; the issue was often criticized as being "pornographic" and sometimes scatological. Movie personnel, and women generally, were portrayed sexually by "popular demand," according to cartoonist Suman Manandhar (2002), responsible for *Kamana's* cartoon, illustration, and design section. He said that the adult content helped the annual to meet its goal of selling twice the number of copies of the previous year. To offset the "plain dirty pornographic" (D. Panday 2002) Gaijatra magazines, the Young Artists Group in 1984 started its annual cartoon magazine, *Bhandbhailo* (Anyone can do anything), which lasted for fourteen issues. *Bhandbhailo* was described by Ram Kumar Panday (2000b) and others as a "quality production" that helped cartoonists and writers to learn to work together. Panday (2000b) said: "Its working style



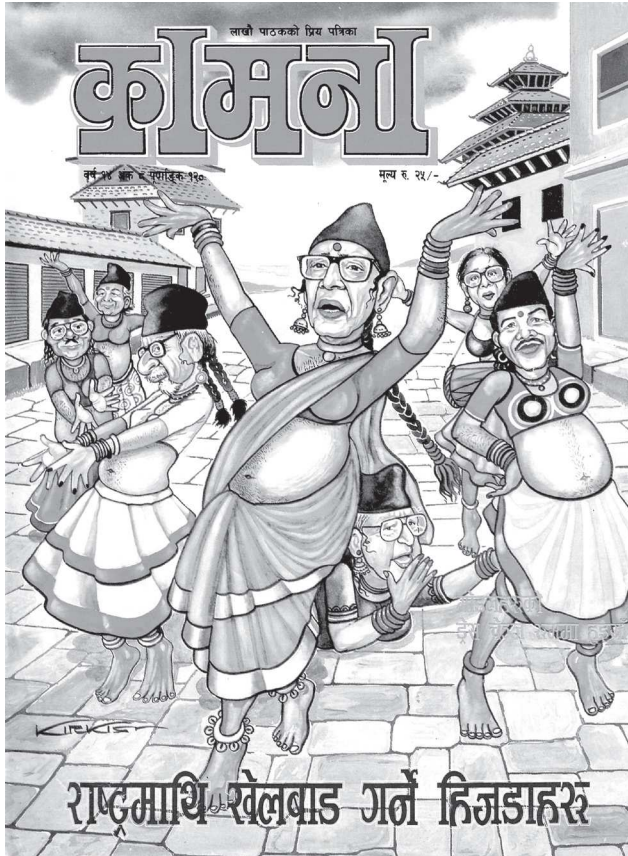


FIG. 16.5. Cover of *Kamana*, a film magazine with many gag and political cartoons, strips, and caricatures. 1998.



FIG. 16.6. Sexual-type cartoons in humor magazines, such as in this 1998 issue of *Kamana*, are often criticized in Nepal.



FIG. 16.7. An early issue of *Bhandbhailo* humor magazine. Courtesy of Ram Kumar Panday.





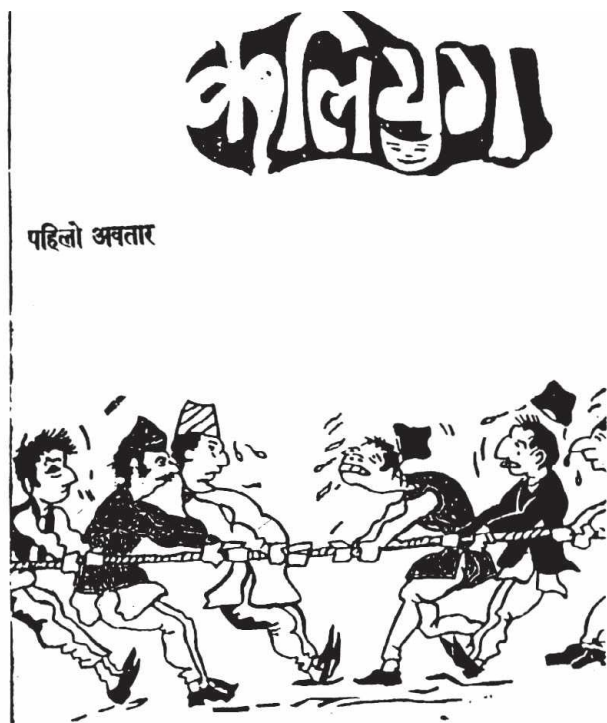


FIG. 16.8. Ram Kumar Panday's *Kaliyug* humor magazine, 1971. Courtesy of Ram Kumar Panday.

was interesting. Just before the Cow festival in August, cartoonists gathered, worked late at night, did some drinking, invited humor writers in, and came up with themes. Any theme could come up. Then, they divided the themes among the different cartoonists."

Additional humor magazines appeared over the years, some not identified solely with Gaijatra. The first "fully humor" magazine was *Kaliyug* (Ironies), which appeared in 1971 under Ram Kumar Panday's editorship. It lasted only two years before being banned for political reasons (R. K. Panday 2000b). *Muskan* (Smile), a bimonthly humor magazine started in the 1980s and lasting more than twenty years, was popular enough in the late 1990s to sustain a print run of thirty-five thousand copies, which dwindled to one-third that number by 2000, the drop attributable, according to the editor in chief, Dharma Raj Baral (2000), to a change of distribution managers and a "politically changed situation."<sup>4</sup>

*Phoo Mantar* appeared for a while in the mid-1990s; other humor magazines over the years were *Jhyaikuti*, *Bhundipurani*, and *Hasyauli Thattauli*. The latter, issued six times from 1991 to 1994, was started by Devendra Panday soon after he left the tenth grade in school. With three friends, Panday collected a small amount of money



FIG. 16.9. Ram Kumar Panday, one of Nepal's pioneering cartooning editors and writers. Osaka, July 26, 2000. Photo by John A. Lent.

and printed three thousand copies of the first issue. With the help of a ruse, the second issue was a resounding success. Panday (2002) elaborated: "Then, for the second issue, I made a same cover design for both the back and front sides. People mistakenly bought two copies. People loved it." The circulation of *Hasyauli Thattauli* shot up to fifteen thousand after the publishers of *Bhandbhailo* assumed its marketing responsibilities, but competition from a "flood" of new magazines and newspapers forced it to close. Devendra Panday (2002) explained the surge in humor magazines by saying that previously, when government restrictions were more stringent, humor magazines tended to come out only during Gaijatra, the one week in the year when cartoonists had more freedom of expression. He added: "The situation is such nowadays that every day is 'gaijatra.' Before, people had to wait for a year to see cartoons, but now, they get them every day. Too much overdose of politics; people don't have to wait anymore. This was one of the factors why our magazine stopped" (D. Panday 2002).

Ram Kumar Panday (2000b), perhaps alone among Nepal's cartoonists, believed that the thirty most recent years of monarchical rule (1960–1990) were

advantageous to cartooning in that the royalty during that period had an interest in humor. In the 1970s, the throne instructed the Royal Nepal Academy “to look after literature and art,” and, in the process, humor was “institutionalized” in Nepal (R. K. Panday 2000b). The academy organized the country’s first cartoon exhibition in 1976, and, the following year, in collaboration with the Young Artists Group, the country’s first cartoon competition and festival.

Also instrumental in bringing a sense of professionalism to cartooning was HaSaNe (Hasya Byanga Samaj Nepal), a humor association started in 1991 by Ram Kumar Panday, with divisions devoted to writing, cartooning, and stage performance and with branches in seven locations throughout Nepal. From time to time, HaSaNe “gathered cartoonists to show them how to improve their cartoons, how to develop relations with cartoonists outside Nepal, to find out what is done outside the country, and to critique Nepali cartoons,” according to the group’s general secretary, Dharma Raj Baral (2000). Training was also provided. Panday (2000b) pointed to the importance of the HaSaNe branches, saying: “Outside the Kathmandu valley, it is very difficult for cartoonists to get references, books and other things. Sometimes, they don’t see any cartoons from outside Nepal and thus are very impressed by the least thing from the outside that they might see.” Most of the country’s more than one hundred cartoonists belong to HaSaNe.

Attempting to advance comic art in Nepal after 2001 has been the Cartoonists’ Club of Nepal, which has sponsored exhibitions and competitions and encouraged social contacts among cartoonists through meetings and its website, Cartcon. Also, since 1994, the annual Basudev Bidhyadev Luitel Guthi Award has been presented to a top personality in the field of humor, including cartoonists; winners receive a substantial amount of money.

The dramatic increase in the number and quality of newspapers and magazines after 1990 served cartooning well, providing added venues of different stripes. By 2001, Nepal could claim 1,620 regularly published

newspapers, 230 of which were dailies. Michael Hutt (2006, 365) singled out the sister broadsheets *Kantipur* (in Nepali) and the *Kathmandu Post* (in English), both started in 1993, as contributing significantly to the development of Nepal’s press. Others he mentioned were *Nepal Samacharpatra*, *Himalayan Times*, *Spacetime Dainik*, and *Rajdhani*, all in Nepali, and the *Himalayan Times* and *Spacetime Daily*, both in English. Older dailies supportive of cartooning included the government-controlled *Gorkhapatra* and the *Rising Nepal*.

The ranks of the cartooning profession swelled as a result of the expansion of the press, so that by the beginning of the twenty-first century there were about a hundred cartoonists working in Nepal, fifty of whom were “very popular and prominent,” according to Ram Kumar Panday (2000b). Among the ten whom Panday considered the most important, only Rabin Saymi (Rabin), Abindra Man Shrestha (Abin), and Basu Chhetij made their living exclusively from their cartooning wages. Tek Bir Mukhiya worked as an artist and book designer, Mohan Shyam Maharjan in a government office, Dhires Kumar Dahal in a bank, Rajesh K. C. in a tourism office, Durga Baral as an artist, Bala Ram Thapa as a designer for *Gorkhapatra*, and Ashok Man Singh as the publisher of *Kamana*.

Whether strips, pocket cartoons, or editorial cartoons, the works found in Nepali newspapers and magazines invariably play on humor and satire associated with local politics and social issues or foibles. Durga Baral (2002) described their contents as “heavy and sharp”; other cartoonists have suggested that their style and contents were imitative, especially of Indian political cartoonists and comics artists (on history, see also Jigyashu 1999–2000; R. K. Panday 2000a, 2000c; Biwash 2002; Ghimire 2000).

## Issues and Problems

A longtime handicap faced by Nepali cartoonists—isolation from one another and from the rest of the world—has been partially overcome through the use of new

information technology and other networking apparatuses. One result has been the spreading out of cartooning, previously confined to Kathmandu, to other parts of the country. Cartoonists now can work from their homes and/or studios outside the city, electronically transferring their creations to publishers.

Lingering problems plaguing the profession are feelings of jealousy and guardedness endemic to a small, tightly condensed community; frequent instances of copying of works, with no effective copyright system in place; lack of formal training facilities; the absence of women cartoonists; and a changing political landscape that, at times, adversely affects the right to publish cartoons. Cartoonist Rajendra Rana (2002) complained about the jealousies that have kept some cartoonists out of the loop:

We get many competition opportunities, but we never get to know about them. The person who gets this information, even if he belongs to a cartoon association, won't give it out. You know, maybe they are scared that someone will reach a higher step.

Some people go so far as knocking on the publisher's door and stealing other person's jobs by poisoning the publisher's ears, attacking their [cartoonists'] expertise or saying their work is not good.

Very few women have worked as cartoonists in Nepal. One of them, Sushma Rajbhandari (2002), who has taught cartooning to female students and draws cartoons to uplift the status of women, explained: "In an underdeveloped, problem-infested country like ours, obviously, the women population are bound to have many difficulties to face. . . . Women in most parts of our country are suffering from many social obstructions. . . . [T]here's an issue of before and after marriage. . . . The problem is not surviving in a male world, but of sociocultural traditions." Female cartoonist Sangee Shrestha (2002) agreed that the problem lay in the "after-marriage decision crisis," stating: "A woman has to get married in our society and she has to make a crucial decision. It's either your work or your family. It's up to you to decide which."

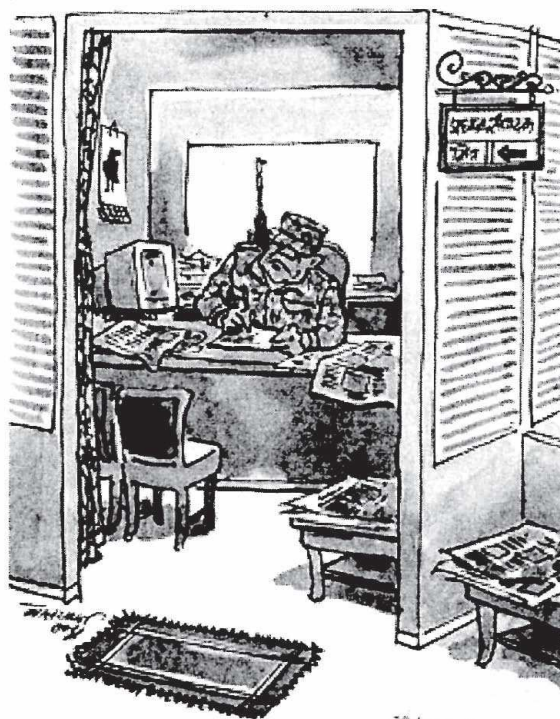


**FIG. 16.10.** A cartoon by Vatsayan shows an army soldier occupying an editor's chair following the start of King Gyanendra's censorship regime in 2005.

Perhaps the most persistent and troubling issue has been that of freedom of expression, which, in the case of Nepal, has been at the mercy of the multitude of government systems that have been in place in the past several decades: from 1951 to 1960, multiparty democracy; 1960 to 1990, the Panchayat system, under which all political parties were banned; and 1990 to the present, a restoration of multiparty democracy that has been stalled by many changes of political administration, a Maoist military movement, various states of emergency, the assassination of the entire royal family (2001), and a deadlocked election (2010).

Veteran cartoonists such as Durga Baral, Ujjwol Kundan Jyapu, Devendra Panday, and Rajendra Rana found the pre-1990 period most repressive, citing occasions when periodicals were banned and cartoonists censored and arrested. During that time, cartoonists assumed pseudonyms, which is still a common practice. Baral (2002) said that because of the risks, he had not been "comfortable" using his own name: "I worked in a government school then; I could have lost my job, been imprisoned and tortured," he said. Jyapu (2002)



related how the magazine he drew for changed its name from *Saptahik Manch* to *Saptahik Bimarsha* after being attacked by the authorities.

Although the Constitution of 1990 guarantees freedom of expression, censorship continues as well as occasional acts of harassment. In 2005, the editors of *Kantipur* and the *Kathmandu Post* were arrested because of a cartoon by Durga Baral that portrayed the constitutional monarchy as a dead animal; similar arrests had occurred earlier, the victims including Rabin Saymi in 1991 and Mohan Shyam Maharjan in 1992. Threats to cartoonists also have come from political factions outside of government. Devendra Panday (2002), who drew unfavorable cartoons of the Maoists, quit drawing them for fear of losing his life, stating: "I think that one day they'll come and kidnap me and kill me eventually."

More than the journalists, cartoonists have tested the limits especially during turbulent times. In 2005, cartoonists were alone in not complying with government directives to the media banning any criticism of the king, the royal government, and the security forces (Gurubacharya 2005; see also Pokhrel 2005).

An apt conclusion about Nepali cartooning is that political cartoons are nearly fully developed, while comic strips are stunted in their growth and comic books are still in an embryonic stage.

#### Notes

1. The field of cartooning is replete with the onerous problem of definition. For years, scholars have debated the origins of cartoons and comics, because they could not reach a consensus about what they were talking about.

2. Other comic books occasionally surface, such as Raju Babu Shakya's *The Life of Buddha* and the folktale-based comic book *Chak-hunchayagu Tangu Kaygu* (The sparrow's lost bean) in 1991.

3. Gajatra dates back about five hundred years, when the king was trying to console his wife after the death of their child. On his orders, representatives of all families stricken with similar misfortunes came to the palace to show the queen that she was not alone in her sorrow. But those who came did the king one better. They brought cows, symbolic of a religious belief that only a cow's horn could open

the gates of heaven. Those from the city who did not own cows wore cow masks. The crowd was in a very festive and carnivalesque mood, a circumstance that the king readily brought to the queen's attention (R. K. Panday 2000b). "During the annual festival, [there are] hundreds of groups demonstrating different things," Panday (2000b) said, adding: "Demonstrators make jokes; some with the king's crown on their heads, etc." A few days of the year, people are allowed to mock the authorities, take on various foolish guises, and frolic in the streets (see Lent 2002).

4. Baral (2000) said that the political scene had become calmer: "When politics is very active, people want more humor and satire."

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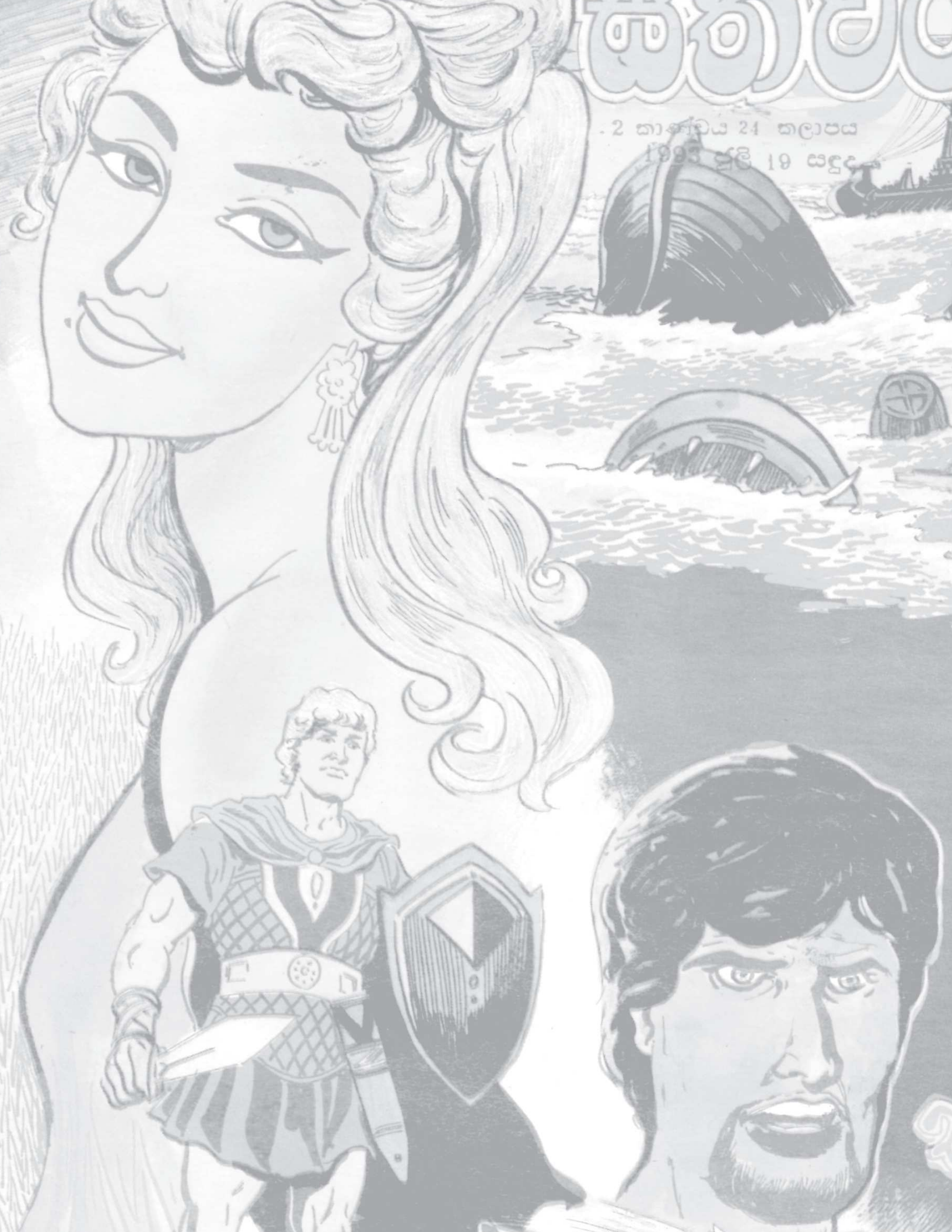
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# කරාමල

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1993 ජූලි 19 සඳුදා





Comic papers (*chithra katha*), the closest equivalent to comic books in Sri Lanka, thrived during the 1970s and 1980s; since then, they have dwindled almost out of existence, according to the doyen of Sri Lankan comic art, Camillus Perera. He blamed the introduction of island-wide television in 1985 for the eventual demise of most comic papers, but he also felt that there were other factors such as the lack of reading by children and the cost of the papers. Perera (1998) said:

Children are not reading. Our *Sittara* used to be patronized by schoolchildren; now, maybe less than 5 percent of them read any comic paper. The high competition for exams means students are required to study and have no time to read comics. They only read what their parents force them to read for schoolwork. When we had our top circulations, the cost of a comic paper was two to two and a half rupees. Now, with inflation brought on by the ethnic wars, the price is ten rupees.

Already in 1998, Perera expressed his dismay at the plight of the weekly comic papers, lamenting: “I don’t know how long the comic papers will survive with the advances of electronic media” (1998). Whereas comic papers at one time sold 200,000 to 250,000 copies, by 1998 the highest circulation was 50,000, attained only by *Sittara* and *Sathsiri*. A new paper Perera started in March 1998, *Gajaman* (Jokes),<sup>1</sup> was barely holding its own with a circulation of 35,000 copies.

There was also a drop in the total number of titles published. In the 1980s, ten to fifteen comic papers were published simultaneously. In 1998, only seven comic papers survived: *Vishma*, *Sittara*, *Mavitha*, *Sathsiri*, *Madura*, *Chithra Katha*, and *Gajaman*. Although between 1993 (the year I conducted interviews in Sri Lanka) and 1998 four papers died—*Rasika*, *Sathwaruna*, *Hithawatha*, and *Sadawasana*—three others, *Vishma*, *Mavitha*, and *Gajaman*, replaced them. *Sadawasana* was closed by its publisher, the famous cartoonist Sarath Madhu, who then joined Perera’s company as a comic paper artist. Perera (1998) said that *Madura* lasted because of government sponsorship. It and *Chithra*

## Chapter 17

# Sri Lanka

## CAMILLUS AND HIS CARTOON CHARACTERS



FIG. 17.1. Camillus Perera and his many characters. Courtesy of Camillus Perera.

*Katha* had a mere circulation of ten thousand copies each in 1998.

Throughout the early twenty-first century, Camillus Publications remained the dominant, and nearly the only, publisher of comic papers. The company's endurance is attributed to Perera's entrepreneurial skills and the popularity of his characters. During a speech at the 2007 Asian Youth Animation and Comics Contest in Guiyang, China, he said: "I occupy a unique position in the field of cartoon-genre in Sri Lanka, because I am an artist and a business entrepreneur simultaneously. I bring out a series of education publications, especially directed at school-goers."

Camillus Publications issues twenty magazines, comic papers, and educational textbooks. Among the company's publications at the advent of the twenty-first century were the comic papers *Sathsiri* and *Vishma*; *Punchi* (Small), an educational magazine for grade two level; *Hapana*, for grades three to five; *Samatha*, grades six to eight; *Sammana*, grades nine to eleven; *Sivu Desa*, a general-interest monthly for the literary and educated classes; and *Asiri*, a Roman Catholic periodical.

Perera's business savvy extends beyond publishing. In July 1997, he and several partners started a savings and development bank (Pramuka Bank), which grew into four other corporations—Pramuka Holdings (the parent firm), Pramuka Finance and Management Services, Pramuka Engineering, and the Protectman Company (securities). Perera (1998) proudly said: "I am director of all five companies. It is a major thing for a cartoonist to achieve that."

Camillus Publications' comics characters, especially Gajaman and Siribiris, are popular and enduring. Originally, Perera drew his renowned characters in newspaper strips; after 1984, he started two of his own magazines and, subsequently, Camillus Publications.

Still drawn by Perera after forty years, Gajaman and Siribiris have appeared in various newspapers, including the *Sunday Observer* and *Sivdesa*. Gajaman is a prankster, while Siribiris has been described as wily, an "[e]veryman personified: long-suffering, taken for granted by politicians, exploited by businessmen, hoodwinked by corrupt officials, and always struggling to simply stay alive. He is down but not yet out. The only

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Kola

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1993 ජූලි මස 18 රැකි ඉරිදි



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FIG. 17.2. A full-color romance comic strip by Janaka Ratnayake in *Divaina*. July 18, 1993. Courtesy of Janaka Ratnayake.

way that poor, unempowered Siribiris can get back at all those who take advantage of him is to puncture their inflated egos and ridicule them at every turn. And boy, does he excel in that” (Gunawardene 2010).

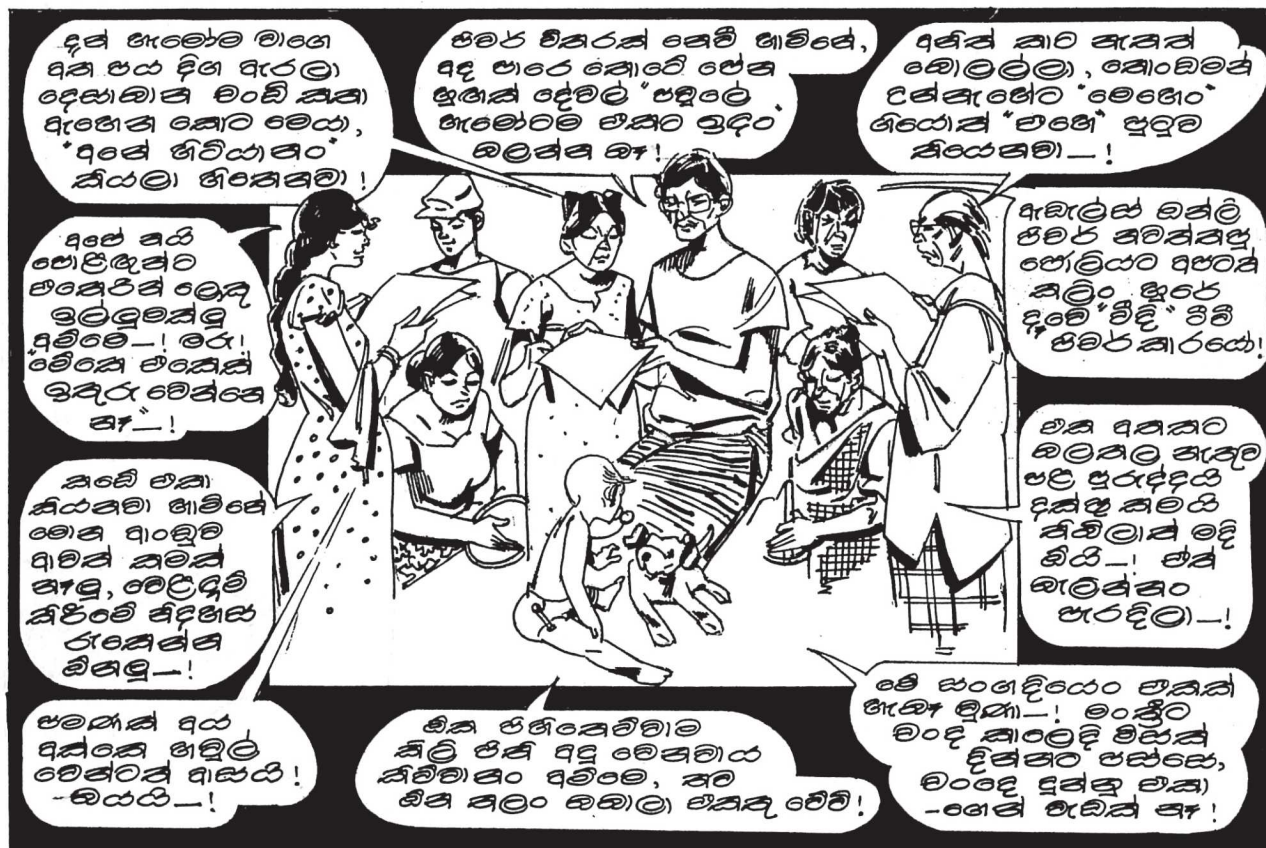
Perera has maintained an exhausting career as a cartoonist, drawing for other newspapers such as *Rivira*, the *Catholic Messenger*, and *Gnanartha Pradeepaya*; his characters include, among others, the “fashionable young lady Dekkoth Pathmawathie, smart aleck kid Tikka and sporty Sellan Sena” (Gunawardene 2010).

Comic strips and comic papers, both of which engage Perera, are distinct genres—the former usually appearing in daily and Sunday newspapers and an occasional magazine and consisting of three or four panels; the latter published as a separate, sixteen-page weekly

periodical, each page a separate story. They meld in that strips have a tendency to shift from mainstream dailies to comic papers and in that comic strips and comic papers share a favorite theme: love and romance.

One strip cartoonist explained Sri Lankans’ fondness for love and romance thusly: “Basically we are a romantic people. Love stories are popular particularly among young people who have not yet experienced love and therefore get a vicarious feeling from reading these comics” (Wickramanayake 1993). Other themes have gained popularity over the years such as ghosts, family feuds, humor, and historical fiction. By the 1990s, for example, Janaka Ratnayake drew a strip for the Sunday *Divaina* about divorced parents fighting for the custody of their child, while W. P. Wickramanayake did one in





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FIG. 17.3. Popular commentary comic panel, *Samaja Samayan* (Societal nonsense), started in the 1950s. Drawn by Daya Rajapaksa for *Lankadipa*. July 18, 1993.

the newspaper *Lankadipa* that was set in the past. He explained its popularity at that time: “People are changing; they want a simpler life and escape into my comic strips which are mostly based in the old days and use old dress, period furniture, and bullock carts” (Wickramanayake 1993). What is unusual is that superhero characters are not part of the fare of the comic papers.

Sri Lankan comic strips are much like those elsewhere, with one exception—a peculiar type of social satire cartoon consisting of one panel, in which a number of people answer a question or comment on a current issue. For example, one person in the panel

might ask, “Have you heard . . . ?” to which the other half dozen or so each respond in a humorous way while making a point. Dating to at least the 1950s, when Henry Tennekoon mastered the form in *Lankadipa* with his *Samaja Samayan* (Societal nonsense), these cartoons used the same setting or locale each time, only varying the discussion topic and responses to it. For example, Winnie Hettigoda’s *Halt*, popular in the 1990s, was centered around a bus stand where seven people discussed a current issue.

Locally created strips are confined to the Sinhalese-language press, the English-language newspapers

preferring American or British comics. The rationale for this preference is simple enough: foreign strips are less expensive to obtain through syndication, and there are so few English-speaking cartoonists willing to do a local strip.

Common characteristics of locally drawn strips are their rather larger format compared to eye-squinting American strips, their concentration on love and romance, and their serialized nature. Some romance strips at times have been more daring in portraying the dress and actions of female characters than those in the United States and elsewhere.

Sri Lankan comic strips have a relatively long history, commencing in the 1930s and 1940s, about the time Bevis Vawa contributed cartoon humor in story format to the *Daily News* and the *Ceylon Observer*. With national independence in 1947, other local cartoonists emerged. Most notable was Aubrey Collette (1920–1992), who drew political and strip cartoons for the *Times of Ceylon* and then the *Ceylon Observer* from 1947 to 1964. Collette was propelled into cartooning by a swift boot. He was teaching at the Royal College (Colombo), and one day he tried to enliven his history class by drawing caricatures of government officials on the blackboard. As fate would have it, the education minister dropped in on the class at the moment Collette was executing a particularly unflattering caricature of him (Collette 1970). Upon joining the *Times of Ceylon* in 1947, Collette's cartoons were very quickly acclaimed the paper's most popular feature. Eventually, in the 1960s, Collette left Sri Lanka; his fame became region wide after he created the laid-back strip character Sun Tan for *Asia* in 1964.

Close on the heels of Collette were G. S. Fernando (the *Ceylon Observer*), W. R. Wijesoma (the *Times of Ceylon*), and Susil Premaratna (*Lankadipa*). Fernando and Wijesoma were primarily political cartoonists; Premaratna is credited with creating Sri Lanka's first strip, a copy of an English cartoon. Wijesoma's career spanned half a century.

Wijesoma joined the *Times of Ceylon* as a proof-reader in December 1947; five years later, he started

drawing *What a Life*, which, according to him, was the first pocket cartoon in the country. It appeared in both the *Times* and *Lankadipa*. After that, he drew another pocket, *Tikiri-Tokka* (Tiny nook), for the Sinhalese-language *Lankadipa*, and he invented a new style of strip consisting of four frames on four different news events, which he called *Sittarapati*. Wijesoma (1993) described it as having a "cinema effect with perforated edges."

Some other cartoonists who started work in the 1960s advanced the profession for decades thereafter; among them were S. C. Opatha, Jiffy Yoonoos, W. P. Wickramanayake, and, of course, Camillus Perera.

Opatha was first attached to the *Ceylon Daily Mirror* as a political cartoonist. He was known for his hard-hitting drawings, especially in the 1960s, when, he said, there was no political interference. Later, in 1977, he and another cartoonist, Chanrandran, drew a booklet of cartoons denigrating the government of Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, published by the opposition in time for national elections. The thirty-page work sold about a hundred thousand copies and was credited by other cartoonists as having hurt Bandaranaike's image and campaign (Wickramanayake 1993; Hettigoda 1993). Opatha (1993) agreed, saying: "I believe the booklet did big damage to her campaign as everyone was carrying it." Bandaranaike attempted to have Opatha and Chanrandran arrested, but, according to Opatha, the "gods saved us." After 1977, it was usual for two or three booklets of mud-slinging cartoons to be issued by political parties during campaigns (Hettigoda 1993).

Jiffy Yoonoos was principally a political cartoonist, first for the Lake House (later, Associated Newspapers) Group, which he left after sixteen years because the company had become sycophantic toward the government, and then for the Communist Party daily, *Aththa* (Yoonoos 1993).

Wickramanayake and Perera played significant roles in the development of strips and comic papers in Sri Lanka. Upon joining Independent Newspapers in 1965, Wickramanayake created strips for the daily *Dawasa* and *Tikiri* (Children's). He moved to Associated Newspapers in 1968, becoming one of the first cartoonists



**FIG. 17.4.** Kusum Mangalika drew strips for a number of periodicals beginning in 1978. From <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2013/03/17/mon02.asp>.

to work for the company's *Sathuta*, Sri Lanka's pioneer comic paper. With the government takeover of Associated in 1973, Wickramanayake joined Wijeya Publishers, which had obtained *Sathuta* by court action. His forte was the love story, used in *Sathuta* and various other places; one such strip, *Chaturika*, ran in *Silumina* for a considerable time. After *Sathuta*'s closing in 1992, Wickramanayake contributed *Attakaka Pipimal* (a serialized ghost story) to *Lankadipa*. In his view, strips deteriorated after the 1960s, the changes attributable to the influence of television on the public's pace and desires. He said that drawings, ideas, and dialogue had been adversely affected, adding: "Because of social changes, language is more slang-like and drawings have deteriorated, using more violence demanded by television-viewing audiences" (Wickramanayake 1993).

A few women worked in comics early on such as Kusum Mangalika, who began drawing strips for the newspaper *Swama* in 1978, and later for *Suhada* and the children's magazines *Punchi*, *Hapana*, *Yahalu*, *Sookiri*, and *Punchi Ape Lakbima* (Samarasinghe 2008). Comic papers commenced in 1972, reached their peak in number of titles (thirteen) and combined circulation (450,000) in 1987, and began a steady decline in the 1990s. Printed on eight-and-a-half by eleven-inch newsprint and in color, they appeared weekly in sixteen-page

editions that sold for six rupees (twelve U.S. cents) per copy. Leonard Rifas, in 1995, described the characteristics of comic papers: "The predominant theme is romance, and the usual format, a thin anthology of continuing serials, each progressing by one multi-paneled page per weekly installment. Most of the pictures show one or two people, usually talking, sometimes waving guns or slapping each other around. The differences between titles tend to be either very subtle or founded in those inscrutable balloons" (Rifas 1995, 109).

Perera said that longevity characterized some stories, lasting "at least two years; one has continued since 1986 [until at least 1993]. If a story is very popular, we add episodes and keep it going; the readers don't want us to stop them" (Perera 1993). Although most deal with love and romance, Perera said that story types varied, with the appearance of an occasional jungle tale or a legend set in a royal court of old. An unusual trait has been the brevity (one page) of each serialized story, a result being that a single issue of a comic paper carried fourteen or fifteen stories, often by as many artists. Occasionally, comic papers use other features, such as a pen pal page.

In the only known survey of comic paper readers in Sri Lanka, Nandana Karunanayake found that in 1990, 57 percent were purchasers and 51 percent borrowers, and that 9 percent read comic papers in the public library and 5 percent in the office or at school. Of the sample, 66 percent favored historical/legendary stories, 59 percent love and romance, and 52 percent thrillers. As for motivations for reading the comics, 57 percent said for entertainment/leisure, 41 percent out of curiosity, 36 percent as fantasy fulfillment, 34 percent out of habit, 22 percent as an escape, and 5 percent to "while away the time" (Karunanayake 1990).

The first comic paper, *Sathuta*, was launched on August 29, 1972, by Lake House. The company had had an interest in comics from the 1960s, when it recognized the popularity of expensive and scarce foreign comic books among Sri Lankans. W. R. Wijesoma (1993), an adviser to *Sathuta*, recalled that he recommended that the target audience should be eight- to thirteen-year-olds, "but it ended up being three to





FIG. 17.5. An inside page of *Chithra Mithra*.

eighty." Most stories in *Sathuta* were copies of foreign comics, although Wickramanayake and Perera made local contributions. Perera's *Gajaman* was born in that first issue of *Sathuta*. When the government took over the Lake House Group the following year, Wijeya Publishers went to court and won the right to retain *Sathuta*; thereupon, Lake House (by then Associated Newspapers) started another comic paper, *Madura* (Ratnayake 1993). Multi-Packs, a packaging and printing firm, launched a third paper, *Sittara*, on October

20, 1975. According to Perera (1993), who was at the helm of *Sittara* from its start until 1986, a director of Multi-Packs had been connected with *Sathuta*, where he became well aware of the profits to be made from comic papers.

One of the most ambitious comic paper ventures was *Chithra Mithra* (Picture friend), the brainchild of one of Sri Lanka's few multinational entrepreneurs at the time, Upali Wijewardene. Within months after it was launched in February 1981, the weekly *Chithra*

*Mithra* attained a circulation of two hundred thousand, eclipsing both *Sittara* (one hundred thousand), and *Sathuta* (seventy-five thousand). Its formula, according to *Asiaweek*, was a mixture of “romance, booze, money, travel, dreams, adventure, [and] wild women” crammed into sixteen pages (*Media* 1981, 11). Very shortly, *Chithra Mithra* expanded to thirty-two pages, every page a different story. *Chithra Mithra* editor Janaka Ratnayake said that the paper had “so many topics—romance, detective, sci-fi, heroes, two pages built around movie stars, and almost a page of pen pals” (Ratnayake 1993). All episodes were serialized and in black and white with a spot of one color.

Wijewardene entered comics because the medium offered the largest market for a new publication aiming to support itself without advertising, and because it provided an opportunity to try out his company’s new printing presses. The publication of *Chithra Mithra* was seen as an experiment—the first step toward Wijewardene’s ultimate goal of bringing out a picture story every day (Ratnayake 1993). But that dream and others died in 1983, when Wijewardene was killed in a plane crash. *Chithra Mithra* lasted until 1986, its circulation down to a dismal fifteen thousand. Ratnayake (1993) said that Wijewardene’s premature death was one of the contributing factors to the paper’s demise, as were the paper’s substandard printing quality (due to unskilled technicians) and the keen competition presented by a dozen or more other comic papers. Comic papers were in abundance, Ratnayake (1993) said, because they were inexpensive and easy to start up. “One only needed five cartoonists who got twenty-five thousand rupees in total salary, plus twenty-five thousand rupees for printing, to make thirty-five thousand rupees in profits,” he said.

By 1993, six companies publishing eight comic papers were still in existence. They were Camillus Publications (*Sathsiri* and *Rasika*), Prahbath (*Sathwaruna* and *Hithawatha*), Multi-Packs (*Sittara*), Associated Newspapers (*Madura*), Himeshan (*Sadawasana*), and Four Line (*Chithra Katha*). There were also a couple of Tamil-language comic papers in 1993, *Kopaleikarak* and *Kapalam*, as well as a Sinhalese monthly, *Jathaka*

*Katha*, which taught morals through stories of Buddha’s previous incarnations and was distributed mainly through Buddhist Sunday schools and temples. *Jathaka Katha* faced trouble in 1993 when the publisher, Hetigoda Industries, manufacturers of Ayurvedic balm, toothpaste, throat lozenges, and herbal drinks, planned to phase it out (Medagama 1993; see also Rifas 1995).

The circulation leaders in 1993 were *Sathsiri* (about one hundred thousand) and *Sittara* (about ninety thousand); all others were in the less-than-twenty-thousand circulation range. In that year, Perera saw a bleak future for all comic papers except for *Sathsiri* and *Sittara*. He predicted that *Rasika* would survive (which it did not), “not to make money” but to provide its sister *Sathsiri* with a set of backup artists, while *Madura* would last primarily because of its government support.

## Publisher Profiles

Unable to obtain updated information on the comics business in Sri Lanka, I have included profiles of the three major comic papers of 1993—Camillus Publications, Prahbath, and Multi-Packs—to provide some insights concerning their business operations.

### Camillus Publications

Camillus Perera started freelancing humor strips to major newspapers in 1966, and within two years he had developed characters for the *Ceylon Observer* and another character called Dekkoth Pathmawathi for Associated Newspapers’ film magazine. His most enduring strip character, Gajaman, was initially (in 1972) a strip in the comic paper *Sathuta*, but it switched to *Sittara* in 1975, where it stayed until 1984.

After about twenty years of drawing for dailies and the first comic papers, during which time he also headed *Sittara* for a decade, Perera stepped out on his own in 1984 with three special collections of his famous characters in magazine format. The magazines were published by different companies commissioned by Perera.



**FIG. 17.6.** Camillus Perera. Colombo, July 19, 1993. Photo by John A. Lent.

The first magazine, *Camillusge Gajaman* in April 1984, spotlighted the humorous title character in a Sri Lankan new year's atmosphere. A sale of two hundred thousand copies prompted Perera to bring out a second magazine, *Camillusge Samayan*, that December, and *Camillusge Gajaman #2* a year later; on the strength of these successes (each sold two hundred thousand to three hundred thousand copies), Camillus Publications was established. The explanation Perera (1993) gave for incorporating was that "[p]ublishers had seen my magazines' and characters' popularity and they tried to finagle my copyrights from me. A court case pending about *Gajaman* has been dragging since 1988. Because of this, I had to form my own company; I also registered all fifteen of my characters with the Department of Registry and Patents."

*Camillusge Gajaman Samaga Sathsiri* (literally *Camillusge Gajaman* along with *Sathsiri*, shortened to *Sathsiri*) appeared in 1986 as the first comic paper under the new corporate name. The first issue sold one hundred and fifty thousand copies, and within six months circulation jumped to two hundred thousand. The second magazine, *Camillusge Don Sethan Samaga Rasika*, shortened to *Rasika*, was based on the day-to-day problems of the family of Don Sethan, a character created by Perera as a strip two decades earlier on May 1, 1966, for the daily *Janatha*. By Perera's own admission, *Sathsiri* and *Rasika* were rather similar, the major difference being that they were drawn by separate teams of artists.

In 1993, all the full-time staff members of Camillus Publications, except for one chief artist and one editor,

were in administration (twenty), production (twenty-five), or sales (twenty-eight). Artists and storywriters were hired on a regular freelance basis. Perera (1993) explained that some story ideas emanated from the artists and the few storywriters he employed, but most were conceived by him.

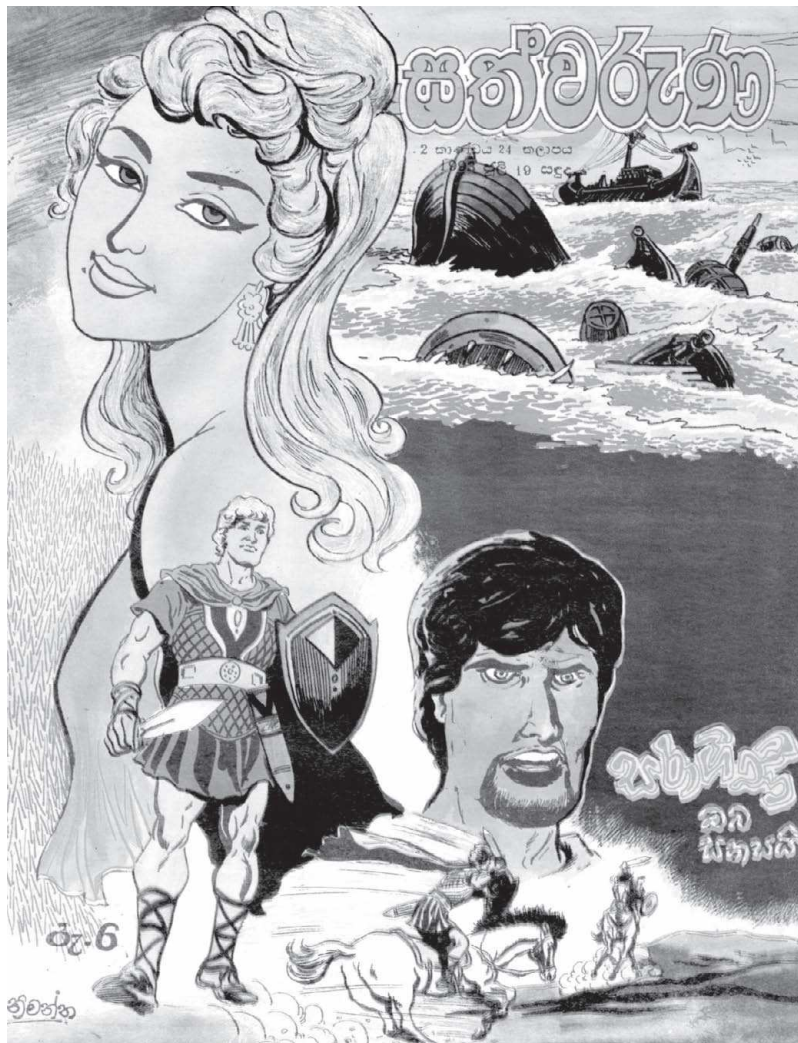
The largest proportion (44 percent) of the budget was reserved for production, while 23 percent went to the government as business turnover tax, 20 percent to distribution, and 10 percent to labor. The company operated its own distribution system. Promotion was done mainly through television, which consumed 90 percent of the company's advertising outlay (Perera 1993).

Perera himself is still very active as a working cartoonist and businessman. He continues to write and draw the stories of his characters, following the philosophy that his cartoons should "focus attention on the follies, foibles and failings of men and women, without even a trace of malice. Therefore, my cartoons are socially corrective and therapeutic in effect as they pinpoint the ills and disharmonies that affect family life and society" (Perera 2007). He has not been able to implement his plan, conceived in the early 1990s, to start up an animation industry in Sri Lanka.

#### Prahbath and Multi-Packs

A brief discussion of these publishers is offered in a historical context to shed some light on the comic paper



FIG. 17.7. Cover of *Sathwaruna*, 1993.

scene of the early 1990s, a better time for comic art generally in Sri Lanka than the 2010s.

The Prahbath Newspaper Company was involved in an array of business ventures: publishing the comic papers *Hithawatha* and *Sathwaruna* as well as the daily *Lakdiwa*, *Thiratharu* (Screen and star), *Kendare* (Horoscope), *Senehasa*, *Kiripani* (Children), and *Kakulu*; producing films; operating one of Sri Lanka's leading advertising agencies; and importing/exporting goods such as glassware, cosmetics, and paper. The company started in 1988 as an outgrowth of the advertising agency, itself begun in 1984 as Prahbath's original business line (see Rifas 1995). Prahbath folded in the mid-1990s. Winnie Hettigoda (1997), who worked as coeditor and cartoonist for the company's daily *Lakdiwa*, said that a change of editors leading to "ideological" differences was the reason for Prahbath's collapse. I met the

new editor, Kusal Perera, briefly in 1993, but he was evasive and uncooperative; later, he failed to show up for a scheduled interview. I have depended upon Leonard Rifas (1995) as my source concerning Prahbath because my many attempts to interview company personnel or even locate their headquarters have met with futility.

Rifas's article contained some business information about Prahbath—that a budget breakdown showed that 70 percent of revenue went to the publisher/printer and 10 percent each to agents, subagents, and the shops; that accounts had a week's credit to pay for the comics they ordered; and that freelance writers and artists were paid according to the "artist and artwork," not circulation of the comic paper, and they made from four hundred to fifteen hundred rupees monthly.

Multi-Packs published the highly competitive comic paper *Sittara* as well as a minipaper,<sup>2</sup> books,



FIG. 17.8. Tamil-language comic books of varying sizes.

and magazines. Already in 1993, the company faced cutbacks. In the late 1980s, Multi-Packs comic papers' circulation reached 240,000, but dropped to less than 100,000 in 1993 (see Rifas 1995). I was unsuccessful in reaching the editor of Multi-Packs while in Colombo in 1993. The editor of *Jathaka Katha* called the company on my behalf, but the watchman on duty said that there was no office there and that a few young artists submitted work, which was published on a contract basis (Medagama 1993).

### Problems and Issues

To recap and expand on points made at the beginning of this chapter, of all the reasons given for the near demise of comic papers in Sri Lanka, the impact

of television has stood out. Rupavahini, the national television service, became a serious competitor of the comic papers, providing its viewers with hours of animated American (and a few Russian) cartoons every afternoon. After 1987, the cartoons were dubbed into Sinhalese, enlarging their audience even further. The public preferred television cartoons because they provided complete stories with action and color, unlike serialized comic paper episodes with their limited number of frames (Wijesoma 1993; Ratnayake 1993). Comic papers and other print media faced the added challenge of augmented television schedules, which further eroded the time Sri Lankans spent reading. A second problem related to the competence of local cartoonists and the quality of the products provided to audiences. In the 1980s and even earlier, comic paper readers got a bargain, as they paid the low price of one rupee to enjoy



the fruits of the best comic artists the country offered. Already in 1993, Janaka Ratnayake said, “there are only a few good fellows in some of these papers,” adding that “[a] lot of the new fellows are teenagers without experience in life” (Ratnayake 1993). As a result, most comic papers contained only one or two well-developed stories; the rest was made up of the same cliché love stories, recycled week after week.

Even more serious, Perera (1993) said, was that the schools discouraged the reading of comics, relegating them to the category of “smut.” Instead, he added, the authorities wanted children to read educational magazines, thus explaining the boom in children’s papers especially at Camillus Publications and Upali Wijewardene’s company. In 1993, eight weekly children’s papers were published with a combined circulation of two hundred thousand. Although they all included many elements of comic art, text dominated and the cartoons used were designed for an eight-year-old or younger audience (Dayananda 1993). Children’s papers continue to be popular, as evidenced by Camillus Publications’ four titles catering to two- to eleven-year-old audiences.

Other factors affecting comic papers were the mushrooming of tabloid magazines and minipapers that gnawed away at their circulations; the high cost of materials, particularly newsprint; the small Sri Lankan market, easily saturated and lacking potential for further growth; and some competition from imported U.S. comic books, or their pirated versions (see Rifas 1995; Wickramanayake 1993).

In recent years, most of these problems have worsened, exacerbated by the proliferation of video games, the Internet, and foreign comic books. The Internet has been exploited by cartoonists as well, as they create web comics, blogs, and networks.

Unlike India, where graphic novels have become popular, Sri Lanka has yet to experience this comic art form to any appreciable degree. Daya Rajapakse Chithra Katha has recently created semblances of graphic novels, the most recent being the 161-page *Asirimath Atheethaya*, and *Steel Industry in Ancient Lanka*, an immortalization of Dr. Gill Juleff, an archaeologist who

discovered the large-scale iron industry that existed in the country during the first millennium AD.

### Connections to Political Cartooning

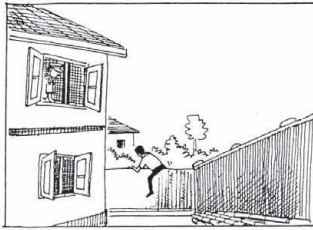
Strips and comic papers in Sri Lanka inevitably have links to political cartoons, as they do in most places. The heavy workloads of political cartoonists often include drawing strips; for years, S. C. Opatha did *Silva*, the exploits of a family man, which was published thrice weekly, first in the *Ceylon Observer* and then in the *Sunday Leader*. Political cartoonist Wasantha Siriwardena did an unusual strip/political cartoon combination in the 1990s. Siriwardena was asked by *Times of Ceylon* editors to do investigative cartoons, whereby he went to the site of an important news happening, did sketches, questioned police, and researched photographs and the backgrounds of individuals involved. From that information, he drew four instructive panels explaining how the news event proceeded (Siriwardena 1993a; 1993b). Siriwardena subsequently was named Sri Lanka’s top political cartoonist in 2001, 2004, and 2008 (Boncza 2010).

The “common man” political cartoons, on the other hand, are connected to strips in their continuity and use of a reappearing character. Winnie Hettigoda had such a regular character called Maraputhra; Jiffy Yoonooos, Appu Hamy; and W. R. Wijesoma, Punchisinglo. The latter was described by a reviewer as a character “with a forlorn face, expressionless and without a way [*sic*] of hope, his tattered clothes, the broken umbrella and the worn-out shopping bag symbolizes the common man to whom nothing matters except his never-ending fight for survival” (Dorakumbure 1990, 6). Hettigoda’s character always stood with the people and against the government; he participated in pickets and strikes with commoners. He was fully bearded and wore a black shirt. Hettigoda (1997) said that he wanted an “active, not pensioned, common man.”

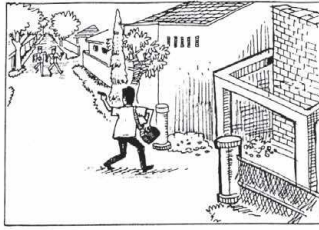
Political cartoonists’ works are sometimes compiled into anthologies, for instance the cartoons of Shantha K.



# Inside view of Tiger hunt in city



The great escape: Sivakumaran gives the police a slip by scaling the wall



Hot pursuit: Sivakumaran shoots at the pursuing policeman



Running for life: the suspect running towards the store room of the Cyril Mathew residence



Dead end: Sivakumaran blows himself up in typical LTTE style

By Sunday Times Defence Correspondent

**T**he spectre of enhanced terrorist activity last week, in the aftermath of the killing of Navy Commander Clancy Fernando, not only haunted the security forces, Police and civilians alike, but also members of the international community in Colombo.

Last Monday, heads of western diplomatic missions and their allies, all aid donors to Sri Lanka, met top government officials. Among those present on the Sri Lankan side were Presidential adviser Bradman Weerakoon, Defence Ministry Secretary Cyril Ranatunga, State Ministry Secretary Marshal Walter Fernando, DIG, A. S. Senewiratne.

The periodic meeting, as usual, was to focus on the subject of human rights — the eleven letters which our donors use as the yardstick to determine whether or not aid should be given and how much that should be if we qualify to receive it.

Compared to some of these meetings in the past years, Sri Lankan officials were satisfied with the mood that prevailed on Monday. Some diplomats raised queries about certain recent human rights issues. But the consensus was that things have improved considerably and there was cautious optimism that things would improve further in the coming months.

Hightening this feeling of confidence, diplomats felt, was the Government's forthcoming co-operation in identifying issues and its willingness to take action — a factor which, they said, was lacking badly in the past years.

But the meeting did not end there. If the diplomats felt they had already deliberated sufficiently well on the problem of human rights, there was still concern on the subject of human lives, over threats posed by the recent spate of terrorist activity.

## Diplomats in doubts

Diplomats representing some important countries raised a spate of queries on whether they were targets themselves and cited reference to newspaper reports in certain sections of the press.

They alleged that the Police had not kept them briefed about the new threats and developments — a sentiment later echoed even by journalists at last week's post Cabinet news briefing.

As DIG Senewiratne explained to them, there was no such threat to warn them about. As for the lament of the media, one senior Police officer at Police Headquarters explained that briefings at this juncture would have jeopardised all their investigations.

But repeated questioning by the diplomats prompted one senior government official to set the record straight. He said no member of any diplomatic mission

**A**s the clock ticked away past midnight last Tuesday, a group of some 80 youth with their weapons concealed in polythene pipes took a boat ride in the sea after setting off from a secret staging area in the Jaffna peninsula.

They landed off the shores of Thondamanaru and walked stealthily towards Idakadu.

Moments later, their weapons were raising fire from the rear end of the Sri Lanka army's Forward Defence Lines (FDLs).

In this area lies the extended perimeters of the main defence base in the peninsula — the Military Command in Palaly. Idakadu lies east of the Palaly base in close proximity to the Thondamanaru Lagoon.

Troops from an Engineering unit who were manning the FDL areas were caught by surprise when they heard volleys of gun fire coming in their direction. Soon they saw shadows of armed men advancing towards them. As they took cover, opened fire intermittently and advanced, they were breaching the mines placed on the outer fringe of the FDLs.

Soon there was a bitter gun battle. The surprised troops were hit badly by gunfire and were falling. Tiger

terrorists began amassing their weapons and were preparing a hurried getaway when infantry units from the neighbouring units rushed in. A bitter gun battle ensued but the infantry men re-captured the FDL which for some four hours lay in the hands of the LTTE terrorists.

When dawn broke, on Wednesday, 46 soldiers and a civilian cook attached to the Idakadu FDL were dead. Their weapons and a sizeable volume of ammunition had been taken away.

The Joint Operations Command in Colombo said 58 terrorists were killed, the largest ever in any single attack on a Forward Defence Line. Of this number, according to the JOC, eleven bodies were found at Idakadu FDL.

The incident once again brought to the fore a major controversy in the country's defence establishment — the military drive in the recent past to capture territory and expand the areas controlled by the security forces.

The strategy was vigorously enforced when the three service commanders — were directly in control and command of military operations in the north and east. The responsibility has since been vested in the Joint Operations Command.

Protagonists of this strategy argued that by gradually expanding the areas of command and control, troops could seize more territory. But those who disagreed were of the view that the troops were stretching themselves too thin on the ground making them vulnerable to surprise attacks.

The extended FDLs in many areas now being held by the troops, the debate on future strategy is engaging the attention of the Joint Operations Command. It is studying whether it is worthwhile tying down troops to extended FDLs and thus depleting strength required for operational tasks.

It is not only Idakadu that has brought the issue to the fore. In September, terrorists attacked the FDL at Vettikallikerny and caused the heaviest ever damage when they escaped with more than fifty million rupees worth of arms, ammunition, communications equipment and vehicles.

A fortnight ago, at a Chettikulam security forces camp, troops were forced to withdraw from two FDLs which were completely flooded. Tiger terrorists seized the opportunity. They infiltrated through these areas and attacked the camp killing six soldiers.

efficiency enjoyed once by the CID in the days of veteran DIG Tyrrel Goonetilleke.

The National Intelligence Bureau too had come in for high commendation by the defence establishment in the recent past. So much so the NIB will soon become the intelligence arm of the State like the CIA in the United States, MI 5 in Britain or Mossad in Israel. The Special Branch is to be revived to become the new Police intelligence arm.

CDB detectives who were following up on breakthroughs they had in the Navy Commander's killing soon took on the probe into the mystery of the two youth at Thimbrigayaya. They questioned residents and learnt that the men who abandoned their get-away-vehicle had walked all the way into a house in Kinilapone. Careful surveillance and raid led to the discovery of not only the AK 47 rifle but also the fact that the house had been an LTTE hideout. The inmates, were, taken into custody, and further questioning, went on.

The Sunday Times has learnt that evidence collected so far by detectives about the two youth points to the fact that they were planning to harm the Muslim Congress leader M. H. M. Ashraff. They have also established that the youth were part of many LTTE hit squads detailed to take on targets in the City. Besides Mr. Ashraff, this group had also

## The bloody night at Palaly

Though the official did not elaborate, the Sunday Times, learnt that following highly reliable reports received by the National Intelligence Bureau (NIB), the Indian authorities in Colombo were alerted.

This was in addition to a number of other overt and covert preventive measures being taken.

But the official's disclosure that the LTTE terrorists were targeting, among others, Indian interests in Colombo, underscored the seriousness of the new wave of terror LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran wanted to unleash.

Prime Minister, D. B. Wijetunge's assertions in Parliament on November 13 that the LTTE hit squads were in Colombo came as no deterrent to the terrorists. Just three days later, on November 16, a suicide bomber killed Admiral Clancy Fernando and three others.

Exactly five days later, on a Friday morning, two youth were loitering near a kiosk at Thimbrigayaya in close proximity to the residences of Presidential Secretary, K. H. J. Wijedasa, Trade Minister, A. R. Munoor and Muslim Congress leader, M. H. M. Ashraff. Their suspicious movements aroused a civilian living at nearby Randoli Lane when he rode past in a motor-cycle.

He rushed to the security men detailed at Mr. Wiieda-

dara of the Presidential Security Division who was on duty jumped on to the pillion of the civilian motor cyclist and tried to find the two suspicious men moving in different directions. Upon being challenged, one of them pulled out an AK 47 assault rifle and shot at Sgt. Premachandra wounding him in the stomach. Later the duo escaped and their get-away vehicle was found abandoned along High Level Road near Kinilapone.

An army bomb-disposal unit which rushed to the scene examined a small bag left behind by two fleeing youths. It contained three hand grenades and the magazine of a Kalashnikov AK 47 rifle. The latter had been wrapped with a piece of a Tamil newspaper printed in Colombo.

## The culprits in light

Who were these two youth. Were they separatist terrorists or paid killers hired to eliminate someone? Whom were they out to kill?

Probing the answers to these questions and many more fell on the Crime Detective Bureau (CDB), which had by then begun exhaustive investigations into the killing of Admiral Fernando.

The CDB, with its headquarters at Gregory's Road and bureaux in all City Police Stations, is fast acquiring a reputation as the coveted investigating arm of the Police

● Illustration by Wasantha Siriwardena  
CDB detectives also made progress on the investigations into the killing of the Navy Commander.

Upon questioning a motor dealer in Gampaha from who the assassin of Admiral Fernando purchased his motor cycle, detectives learnt that there was a second motor cycle. Both motor cycles had been sold by the dealer to the Tamil youth.

## Exhaustive investigation

Detective traced the registration number of this motor cycle (126-4705) and found they were registered on November 24. The address given was 33/1, Wijerama Mawatha, a two storeyed structure. When the Police went there they found there was no one downstairs. A Police party then went upstairs to question inmates whilst others left the premises.

Police Inspector Nilabheden was questioning the inmates upstairs when his colleague, Policeman Amerdeen was in the backyard of the premises conducting a search. Suddenly he heard Amerdeen shout that he was being fired upon by a youth who had scaled a wall and escaped towards Barnes Place.

Police radio sets crackled. Whilst some Policemen gave chase, men at the CDB headquarters rushed in to set up barricades and seal off the area. They were hot on the trail of a youth who fired intermittently at his pursuers and fled into the residence of the late Cyril Mathew at Barnes Place.

The youth inserted a cyanide phial into his mouth, lay on the ground and pulled the pin from a grenade and placed it closer to his chest. Within seconds the grenade exploded tearing his chest and body. The cyanide phial lay unbidden in his mouth.

## A top rung LTTEer

The young man was soon identified as Sivakumaran of Manipay, the man who had collaborated with the assassin of Admiral Clancy Fernando. Police have arrested at least three others, one of them described as a top rung LTTE man. The latter's identity, detectives said, was discovered only sometime after his arrest. "He is an important man. That is all I can say at this time," a senior detective told The Sunday Times.

Contrary to earlier theories that Admiral Clancy Fernando may have been an opportunity target, current findings it is learnt, point to the fact that the LTTE had been targeting him. This is particularly so in view of the Sri Lanka Navy's performance in preventing boats entering the Elephant Pass Lagoon at a point called Kilaly. Several terrorist boats had been successfully hijacked by Navy craft.

Whilst stepping up activity in Colombo, LTTE leader, also launched a major attack on the Forward Defence Lines of the main military base at Palaly, an incident in which the LTTE cadres were to suffer the worst casualties in attacks on FDLs. Security forces also

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**FIG. 17.9.** Wasantha Siriwardena's investigative comic strip of a real crime in the Sunday Times (Colombo). Courtesy of Wasantha Siriwardena.

Herath in *Sathes* (2008), his second collection. Herath received his cartooning start as a teenager, contributing a regular strip to *Sittara* (De Chickera 2008).

## Conclusion

Except for those of Camillus Publications, comic papers have nearly disappeared in Sri Lanka with the advent of the most recent "information age." In their prime, they played important roles as entertainer, educator, and often satirist. It is a wonder they endured as long as they did in a country with a variety of competitive media in a limited market, affected by economic downturns and

torn asunder by civil war, political assassinations, and natural disasters.

Although comic papers are less visible now, other forms of comic art continue to appear in Sri Lanka as political cartoons in the mainstream press, as advertisements, and as decorative and gallery art.

## Notes

1. Perera described *Gajaman* as similar to *Mad* magazine, but with limitations. He said (1998): "In Sri Lanka, such a magazine has to go with politics. People like politics. But, I have to do it very carefully, especially about sensitive topics. I have to be neutral and not use personal attacks. I use an indirect attack approach."

2. Minipapers are the size of tabloids folded in half; they feature political news and “[just] about anything else, including poor cartoons” (Hettigoda 1993). They date to 1993, when *Colama* (Column) appeared, followed by about a dozen others including *Kaputa* (the sound of a crow), *Thrisule* (Trident), *Thoppiya* (Hat), and *Kinihira*.

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